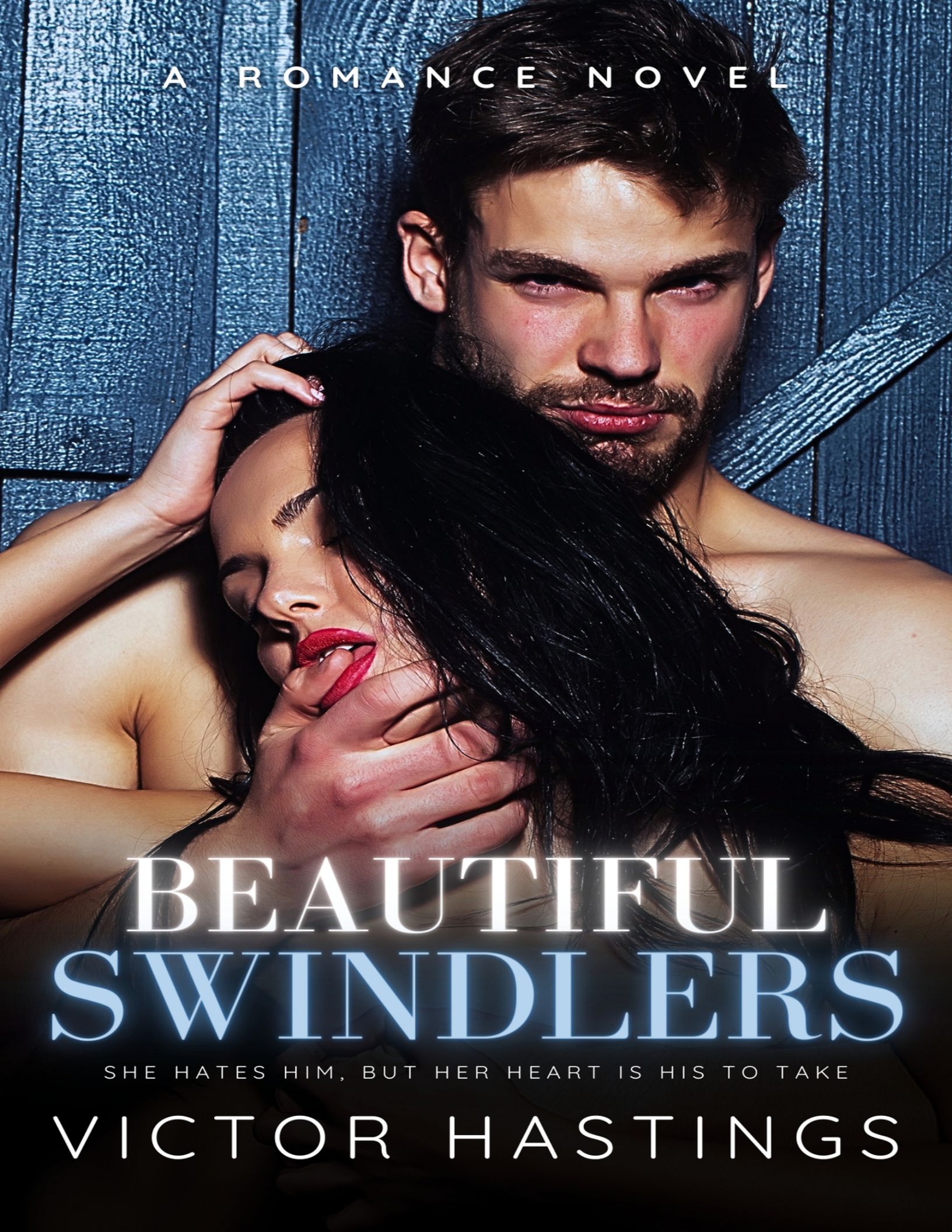
A ROMANCE NOVEL
BEAUTIFUL SWINDLERS
SHE HATES HIM, BUT HER HEART IS HIS TO TAKE
VICTOR HASTINGS

Beautiful Swindlers

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Dedication

To the girl who wants a gentleman in the streets, but a fucking psycho in the sheets.

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Acknowledgement

To the people who made this book come to life;
My father (For his financial and emotional support)
My mother (For being the best mum in the world.)
Shehza Kainat (Proofreader)
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Yasmina (Beta reader)

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Author's note

This book contains themes that may be disturbing to some readers. This is not a clean romance and if you'd like to get a list of the contents that may be disturbing, email me at victorbooktok@gmail.com. For those of you who love going in blind, remember this is a dark romance and a work of fiction.

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PROLOGUE

ARTHUR

Nineteen years ago

I didn't choose this life; this life chose me. I had to do this for her, for us. It was time we took a huge turn. Living on the streets wasn't what we deserved. No one deserved such horror.

It was a beautiful morning, Mother Sun in the sky blessing us with her golden rays. Perched at the corner of an alleyway, I scanned the streets of London. Men and women of each class padded along the pavement, cars navigating through the narrow road, their angry horns blaring.

The rich class held their faces high with pride, ignoring the middle class; and if by any means they looked at them, their stupid eyes would be flooded with contempt. The middle class deceived themselves, trying to fit in with the rich, buying the same things they bought and ended up penniless. Unfortunately for us, we were in the last and least class—the poor—the lowest part of the cash chain. We were the ones who had to feed off the remnants of what the two classes left for us.

But none of these mattered now; I was waiting for him. The lunatic who had dared to spit on my dear Jane. Across the street was a beverage store with a large window overlooking the slender road. He always came there every morning. I had been watching him since that day—the day he dared to cross the line. No one touched my dear Jane, and even worse, no one should dare spit on her.

There he was, my target. Sporting a black mustache, he wore a black coat and held his head high with arrogance as he strolled along the pavement, a black walking stick in his hand. For a rich man, he was scrawny and possessed an ugly, aquiline nose.

The store's owner hadn't opened yet, so he had to wait outside. That was precisely what I was hoping for. Sticking my hand inside an overcoat a tad bit

large for a nine-year-old, I advanced to the narrow street, my head facing down to avoid curious eyes.

Now!

I bolted down the road, ear-bleeding blares reminding me of how reckless that was. Right now, I didn't care if I had my head smashed by a bloody lorry. This man was going to regret the day he saw my sister. With quick feet, I vaulted over an oncoming car. It all happened so fast. One second, I was bumping into him, and now I was dashing down the street with his wallet in my hands. It was heavy. I grinned. This was too easy.

"Thief!"

Maybe not that easy.

Run!

You didn't need to tell me twice! Squeezing myself through the crowd, I was left with a bunch of "Oh my Gods", "What a brat", and "smelly lad." Just know, the streets of London were filled with foul people who needed an exorcism for their tongues.

When I approached a junction, another scream cut through the air.

"Police! Stop, lad!"

Lad? I was a man! A gentleman, to be exact. I despised people with proper manners.

But you have the body of a nine-year-old.

Jesus Christ!

Please just shut up and give me ideas of how to escape.

At times it sucked having an inner mind that didn't know when to talk and when not to.

Go left!

Snapping my head in the direction, I darted to an alleyway flanked by two apartment complexes. Luckily, they had fire escapes. Running up the starting stairs, my heart was in a knot, about to blow up. Who knew running away from the police was this hard?

"Stop there, lad!"

I paused, my hands on the black rails, my eyes declining to the direction of the voice. In a crisp blue uniform was a constable, and behind him stood my ugly

arch nemesis.

That bastard! I would rather go to hell than give him back his wallet.

My brows snapped together. "What is it, officer?"

He held up a baton at me. "Come down, lad, and I won't have to pummel ya."

"I suppose I don't have a choice?"

“Yes."

My gaze travelled to the owner of my recently acquired property. "Do you want your wallet, sir?"

"You this little..." His black eyes scorched with fury.

Oh, dear. He was mad, and I loved it!

I grinned. "You'll have to catch me if you want it back."

"Stop that weasel!" The man's finger snapped at me.

"Yes, sir!"

Good God, I was back to running again. With my heels at my back, I ran for my dear life. A cadence of thuds was a quick reminder of the constable after me. At the rooftop, I glanced over my shoulders, a heavy-breathing man in blue welcoming my eyes. Phew! Poor man.

"H-hand over the-the wallet, lad," he stuttered, laying his ivory hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

"It's mine now." I grinned, my hand on my waist.

"Come here!"

Oh! Oh!

He rushed to me like a hungry lion. What should I do? What should I do? My eyes roamed frantically around the area. All I could see were the rooftops of other buildings and an angry man bolting towards me.

His cuffs.

Like a cheetah, I dashed to him with grace and confidence.

One.

Two.

Three.

Bingo! I slid under his legs and snatched his cuffs from his back pocket. Before he could bat another eyelid, his legs were in steel bondage. Unable to keep

his balance, he slumped to the floor, hitting his head and letting out a curse before he passed out.

I winced. "Maybe I was too hard on him."

Without hesitation, I opened the wallet.

"ID card." I flung it away. "What is this balloony thing?" It was transparent and took the shape of a finger. Meh! It wasn't useful; I flung it away. "Ten pounds, five pounds, fifty pounds." I counted the money, and my jaw slacked. "This is one thousand pounds!"

My sister and I could start over! *Oh my God.* I covered my mouth with both hands; this was more than good news. This was spiffing! I couldn't wait to tell her. I glanced at the constable. He was lying there unconscious, and an arrow of pity stabbed me. It wouldn't hurt if I gave him something. After all, it was my fault he was in this condition.

I moved over to him and tucked two fifty-pound notes into his pocket. "Here's for the trouble."

With one last look at him, I took off. This was the beginning of something good for my sister and me.

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Chapter 1

ARTHUR

They said, "Money is the root of all evil." *Well, bloody ignorant fools, aren't they*? What on earth would make someone think so evil about money? Beautiful, dangerous, and resourceful. This was money, and I was about to make a lot more with the unwise young man seated before me.

Benjamin McCain. Six foot two, broad shoulders, American, and dull brown eyes that spoke of his incapability to see he was about to be scammed by yours truly. He sat with a broad smile and a lean leg crossed over the other. His neatly shaved lower face and perfectly ironed luxurious black suit would make you think he was a sensible gentleman. I was afraid he was far from that. As a matter of fact, Mr McCain was a fool at twenty-five.

"Mr—"

"Atkinson," I lied. Now, I was sure this lad's brain was tinier than that of an ostrich. This was the fifth time we were meeting, and he couldn't still remember my name.

I glanced around the cafe, seeing if I could spot any potential clients. The walls were coated with white paint, and the lower part panelled with dark brown wood. The chairs were covered with gold, and the white tiles sparkled like they were cleansed of their sins. Despite how rich this place looked, I was afraid I couldn't see anyone of affluence. They all looked like they needed financial aid. Of course, I could tell from the cheap clothes they wore.

"Mr. Atkinson." Benjamin the fool leaned forward, resting his hand on the brown table separating us. It was almost as if the furniture was keeping apart our intellects—mine, obviously the better. "As you know, we've been bargaining the estate's price. And you're still sticking to your price of five million dollars. Why aren't you willing to reduce your offer?"

Wasn't it obvious? I loved money.

My sister always wanted me to quit and cease our operations. I wanted that too. As unusual as this might sound, considering I was the most capable man in the world, I feared the money would never be enough. We would always have some old rich fool out there who would be far richer than we could ever fathom. If someone like that existed, the wealth would never be enough to protect my sister.

Money was power.

"Mr. McCain, Langford estate is one of the most popular estates in Los Italos. We pride ourselves as one of the best and wouldn't want to sell for less," I said.

For once, his dull eyes glinted with life and curiosity. "But, when I got to your boss's office, he refused to see me. How come he finally agreed to sell after the stunt he pulled?"

That was because this 'boss' wasn't mine and didn't even know their beloved estate was about to be sold.

"On behalf of my boss, I apologise for his rude remarks. However, for now, I want us to speak of monetary matters."

He held his hands up, a sign that he had given up and was about to accept the deal. "Alright then. Four point one million dollars. That's the most I'm willing to offer."

I crossed my arm, deliberating on whether it was a good offer. From what I knew, the actual owner of this estate would value it at about eight million. Mr. McCain probably knew that, and the fact I was offering it for less was enough reason to be tempted. The greedy ones were the easiest to catch.

"Four point five, and we have a deal." I glanced at my golden Rolex. We had been negotiating for the past hour. It was quite funny for someone about to buy a fake estate.

He stroked his triangular chin and watched me. There was no need for all that. He would still be scammed despite the amount he decided to pay.

"Alright. Four-point five. Where do I sign?"

Those words made my heart flip over. Americans were so easy to dupe. I was living the American dream better than any of them. A sincere smile appeared on my face, and I held out my briefcase. Laying it on the table, I unbuckled the

locks and brought out my laptop. We did the transfer, and the money was sent to my account in twenty minutes. I handed a fake document to him and a pen afterwards.

"Just sign here," I said, pointing at the space for his signature.

He signed it and extended his hand to shake me. "It was a pleasure doing business with you."

"Likewise," I said, shaking him, my voice sweeter than chocolate.

He took the documents and fixed them inside his briefcase. He smiled at me when he arrived at the cafe's door. In reply, I gave a curt nod. The bells above the entrance rang as he pushed it open and went away. This was the fun part of my job, watching in humour as my victims walked away, unaware of what they got themselves into.

That was pretty much it. I blew out air and glanced outside the glass wall. People walked on both sides of the concrete pavement, the golden rays of the sun bouncing off the glass walls of the skyscraper across the cafe. Cars passed by occasionally. Los Italos hadn't changed. It was still full of dumb Americans to scam.

More dumb Americans, more money.

I looked at my watch; it was afternoon already. I had to go. Grabbing my briefcase, I was about to stand when something grabbed my shoulder and pushed me down on the seat. I glanced over my shoulder. There was a fair hand with freshly done nails clinging onto me. I could tell they were freshly done because the smell of acetone streamed into my nostrils.

"Not so fast, buddy." The grip tightened. "You really shouldn't be doing this to people."

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Chapter 2

ARTHUR

I had to admit, I was a tad bit scared. My mind had hovered over the idea of the stranger being the police. But fortunately, I was mistaken, which rarely happened. It wasn't an officer. Instead, it was a lady. A beautiful, eccentric lady.

She sat across the table, her alluring black eyes regarding me and rendering me breathless for a few seconds. That never happened to me. I was always calm and composed.

The lady's bare feet were laid on the table and bloody hell, they stunk like she hadn't showered in millennia. Bollocks! My nose wrinkled, loathing the odour. Where were her bloody manners?! Why couldn't she wear her trainers? They were right there on the floor, next to her chair.

As if that wasn't enough, she had strands of dark-brown hair springing from her poorly tied ponytail. Her black rumpled jumper and pair of worn-out trousers had confirmed my theory. It appeared the lady didn't seem to care about her looks. Most ladies wouldn't dare to leave their houses with hair like that.

She was chewing a piece of gum very loudly, which was unladylike. Her lack of manners didn't seem to cease. However, If she were decent enough and dressed more like a lady, she would be a bit more presentable.

"Wassup."

"What's up?" I glanced outside the window. "The sky, I suppose. It's always up there." Americans always made English sound so horrible. What in Christ's name was wassup?

She hit the bridge of her glasses and cleared her throat, showing no reaction to the joke I made. "I know what you did, Mr. Atkinson." Her eyes narrowed. "Or is that even your real name?"

Jesus Christ. This tiny shrimp was listening to my conversation! But how? Her ears weren't that sharp, were they? They looked normal, from what my eyes

could tell. Maintaining my poise, as I always did so flawlessly, I put on a charming smile.

"If you must know, Atkinson is my name, and I don't tolerate eavesdropping."

Her pink lips curved into a smile that sent a cold slither down my spine. A smile like that should be illegal. It was bright but had a dark intention hidden behind its facade. That was a bloody mischievous smile! Who did this lady think she was?

"I saw the document you gave that man. The seal of ownership at the top right was fake. Los Italos government has two falcons, not two eagles."

How could she tell the difference from where she once sat? I steadied my gaze on the lens of her glasses. She had over four! No wonder she could spot the distinction. This little vixen! Her toes wiggled, and she smiled, only this time, it reminded me of the Cheshire cat. She seemed to be enjoying this, making a full-grown gentleman like me to be deep in his thoughts. Bugger! She knew what I did, but didn't tell the man. Hope washed through me at that moment. This young lady must've wanted something from me; that was why she didn't say a bloody word. That was the only explanation. After all, humans were greedy, and she was no exception.

"Ah! You appear to be using a pair of glasses. That should elucidate the reason for your inability to see clearly." My ticket out of this mess was acting dumb. She couldn't possibly believe I was a swindler.

She frowned; my words weren't to her liking, I suppose. "I'm not a bat, Mr *whatever you call yourself.* Don't play dumb with me; I know what you did and what you are."

"Spiffing!" I chuckled and spread my arms. "Mind telling me what I am then."

"A fucking *con artist*," she said those words like they were poisonous, like if she ever repeated them, she might die.

I cackled; her words were quite humorous. How dare she call a genius like me a bloody con artist? Who knew the eavesdropper was a sit-down comedian?!

"Did I say something funny?" Her tone was mixed with uncertainty and anger.

"Yes, you did," I said. "Why in the Queen's name, bless her soul, would you think I'm a con artist?"

"You just sold an estate that wasn't yours." She shrugged her shoulders. "That's enough proof."

I smirked. "Correction, the only proof you claim you have is the seal. No one would even believe you."

"Is that what you think?" She held up a brow and pouted. "Oh, you're damn wrong."

"What could you possibly do?"

She brought down her *oozing* leg. Thank Christ for that! Next thing, she stood up.

"Perhaps your latest victim would love to hear the story of how you scammed him!"

She yelled. She fucking yelled! Jesus Christ! How on earth did the universe think it was a good idea for this girl to meet me? Everyone in the cafe turned to look at us; if I didn't know better, I would say their difficult stares were filled with disgust.

I cracked out a nervous smile for them. "I'm sorry, she has a mental illness."

"I'm not mentally ill," she argued, locking her arched brows.

With clenched teeth, I said. "Yes, you are."

The intense stares stopped, and everyone had gone back to their business. I took a deep breath. This lady was a lot. Raking my hand through my hair, I looked at her. She was grinning from ear to ear. *Happy with yourself now, eh?*

"What do you want?" I asked, unbuttoning my suit jacket and loosening my tie. I was boiling inside. How convenient for someone wearing a suit and a bloody waistcoat!

"I'm in need of a criminal like you," she said.

Typical human. She was bound to want something. They all did. *Wait a bloody minute...* This little urchin just called me a criminal!

"I am *not* a criminal."

She rested her bare feet on the table again. This little rodent! *Deep breaths, Arthur, deep*—that wasn't a brilliant idea. The pungent smell of sweaty feet came rushing in like never before. The insides of my stomach knotted, and I wished I

hadn’t thought of doing that. I cleared my throat; the smell of those feet could kill all the fish in the Atlantic.

"You take money from people without their consent. That's theft. And if I remember correctly, that's a crime. And people who commit crimes are called criminals."

"Marvelous, I didn't know you were well-versed in the art of crime and justice." I got up from the seat and glanced at my wristwatch. She had taken over thirty minutes of my time! Part of the reason I was in a hurry was her smelly feet. Even God knew I needed to get away from that radioactive odour.

"If you'll excuse me, I have somewhere I need to be," I said, shifting my seat aside.

The lady quickly sprung up from her seat. In fact, I had never seen anyone move so fast. She put both hands in her pocket and clicked her tongue.

"I can't tell you what I want to say now. We're in the open," she explained. That was none of my concern.

"My apologies, but I didn't ever mention being enthusiastic about your discussion. So, if you'll excuse me..."

She did a side step, blocking me, a frown on her face. "Give me your number so I can reach out to you again. If not, I'll find that poor, unlucky man and tell him you scammed him of his money."

This lady! I wouldn't use the word 'scammed'. 'Took' or 'take' was preferable. Money was precious, and anyone who wasn't smart enough to keep theirs didn't deserve it. That was my policy. So I didn't scam, I *took*. A decent reason it was. Undoubtedly, one that this scalawag wouldn't be too eager to agree upon.

Nevertheless of my bloody policy, I had something urgent to deal with now. The curious eyes of the people in the restaurant made me feel like nonexistent insects were crawling up my arm. This was ludicrous! This troublesome lady had succeeded in putting me in a tight corner. Either I handled this quickly, or I hampered, and things would escalate.

She had won this fight.

"Fine." I rummaged for my card in my pocket and handed it to her. "I don't take midnight calls."

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Chapter 3

OCTAVIA

I held onto the business card Atkinson had given me, the warmth of his touch still lingering around my knuckles. He was a beautiful man; I would give him that. My gaze followed his retreating form as he left the cafe. His broad shoulders were almost the width of the doorway, and he literally had to bend to exit the place.

My dirty mind trailed to how my fingers would look clinging to his broad set of shoulders while he—*God, what is wrong with me?* I needed to focus on the task at hand. He was a thief, and there was no falling for a thief in my books. Ever.

As crazy as this might sound, this wasn't how I had intended for my day to go. I was just branching for my usual coffee break during my morning jogs and happened to stumble upon this criminal. Just a few moments ago, I was looking for someone to hire to help me put an end to my ex-boss and his associates. But after my conversation with Atkinson, I wouldn't have to hire anyone anymore. He would work for me, and he would do it entirely for free. He just didn't know it yet.

Exhaling sharply, I left the cafe and continued my jog down the streets of Los Italos. My playlist played as I plugged in my earphones, aiming to drown out the noise around me. Atkinson seemed like a man I had to be careful with. At first glance, despite his captivating cerulean gaze and well-combed dark hair that sent a wave of shock through me, I still had to remind myself that he represented everything I was fighting against. He was a thief, one of the fruits of corruption.

After minutes of gut-wrenching jogging, I reached my brick-walled apartment and walked in, nearly stumbling over the heap of clothes in the welcoming lobby. Beams of light phasing through my tall windows struck into the living room, and I spread out my arms, letting the warmth envelop me.

Once I was done basking in Mother nature's glow, I started my morning ritual. I moved to my window and looked outside, waiting for the vehicle that had tormented me for days. It didn't take long for it to appear.

It was a black SUV. Since the day I got fired, it passed my apartment every single day at ten in the morning. Occasionally, it would park a few blocks from my building. But I never saw anyone exit it.

My back straightened. I was being watched. It sounded like a bogus conclusion, but it was best to think of the worst. I had considered calling the police, but I didn't want it to turn out to be a false alarm. Years as a reporter taught me how to trail someone and also know when I was being trailed.

There was a knock on my door, and I rushed to it, holding an umbrella in case I needed to defend myself. I peeped through the eyehole and saw Tam, my landlady. Letting out an air of relief, I opened the door and was welcomed by her sharp, dark eyes glaring at me, her burly hands on her waist.

"When are ya gonna pay your rent, missy?"

I scratched my head. "Rent? Oh, rent! I'll be going to the bank today to withdraw some cash."

"Hm," the lady narrowed her eyes at me. For the past few weeks, I'd been lying to her about paying my rent, and whenever the time came to pay it, I would bail on her. Hell, I wouldn't blame her if she kicked me out. "Fine, but you better have my money ready by tomorrow."

"I will, Tam, I promise you," I said, holding the door knob.

She gave me a menacing stare one last time before she descended the short flight of stairs. I went back to my living room and sat down on my settee. Digging my hand into my sweaty pants, I brought out the business card Atkinson gave me.

A smile crept onto my face. The reporter in me couldn't resist. I had to stalk this man on the internet. I mean, I was a bit curious. Taking out my laptop, I opened the web browser and searched for his name.

As expected, many Atkinsons came up. I spent the next thirty minutes scrolling through an endless list of ugly faces that looked nothing like him. I decided to add 'real estate agent' to his name in my next search.

Nothing.

Zilch, rien, nada.

I massaged my forehead. Who was I fucking kidding? This man was a con artist. Why would he use his real name? 'Atkinson' had to be an alias. In all my years as a reporter, this was the first time I was stuck. There were no open ends or ideas on how to find who this guy was.

After another hour spent searching for him through all forms of social media, I cemented my thesis. Atkinson was a pro, and if my assumptions were correct, he would be my ticket to finally achieving all I've ever wanted—justice for my dead parents. But I had better be right. If not, I would be living a life of regret for the rest of eternity.

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Chapter 4

ARTHUR

I was finally away from that mad woman. Sighing, I slid open the glass door at the entrance of my modern-styled home. An interior designer would wish I had never been given the keys to this house. A white settee was placed at the center of the room like it governed the kingdom of the scanty parlour. A black television, which I rarely used unless it was for money, of course, was hanging on the white wall, facing my lonely settee. At least it had the company of other electronics. Except for these two, there was nothing else here.

The house was quiet. So quiet that I could hear my breathing. That meant only one thing: my sister was in the basement. Like the generous brother I was, I couldn't wait to share the splendid news with her. Descending the stairs leading to the basement, thuds kept sounding in rhythmic succession. Locking my brows out of curiosity, I quickened my pace.

Blimey.

My sister was covered in sweat, which made her ivory skin glisten under the white bulb dangling above her. Her hands, covered in white boxing tapes, landed thick blows on a black leather punching bag. That bag should be crying enough tears to fill the Thames! She was twating the bloody hell out of it! What could make her this pissed off? I wouldn't want to be the reason.

She stopped punching and hugged the bag, commanding it to be still. The black singlet she wore stuck to her body like a second skin, courtesy of her remarkable perspiration. Beads of sweat rolled down her face, and she gasped for air. *You finally outdid yourself, Jane.* The silence in the room made me uneasy. She didn't look like she would be in the mood for my good news.

"You're an hour late." Her cockney accent, mixed with her furious tone, made her words sound a lot more menacing.

"Indeed, I had some unwanted company."

My mind flashed back to the mad lady and her smelling feet. Disgusting, no matter how you might think of it.

My twin sister's sea-blue eyes, our only identical features, locked onto mine. Above that deep blue sea, thick grey clouds surfaced with tumultuous thunder, a harsh wind chaperoning it. I was just bloody late! It wasn't like I had cut her punching bag into two or thrown her favourite revolver into a river!

"Ms. Hannah called."

"Oh."

That clarified the heavy punches and cold stares. If you would like to know, Ms. Hannah was a client of mine with certain interests in activities that would make any Frenchman in the Victorian Era run for his dear life.

"She told me to bark like an American foxhound," Jane whispered. "Can you imagine the horror? I was barking like a fool while she fingered herself."

That was nothing compared to my experiences. I had once been asked to mimic the sound of a blue whale. And Ms. Hannah always ensured you made the animal noises faultlessly as she touched herself.

Jane used her teeth to loosen her boxing tape. "I just can't wait to pounce on her. She'll regret making me sound like a fucking animal."

"Dearest, cheer up, will you? There shall be no pouncing, and you're certainly no animal." I glanced around the basement lined with bookshelves and a large monitor facing the stairs. "Why don't we celebrate our new triumph?"

"I knew you'd get the money," she mumbled, still losing her boxing tape. Her knuckles had grown darker, a result of her late nights down here, beating the bloody shit out of the leather bag. I was anticipating a couple of cheers, but she denied me my expectations. Conceivably, I had to try harder than that.

"Four point five million dollars is worth a few smiles, innit?"

She smiled, displaying her white set of teeth. Even a bat would've known it wasn't honest. Tossing her boxing tape onto a desk, she collapsed on the chair before it, her long black hair falling behind the furniture.

"Alright, I'll get you that machine gun you've been asking for."

You would never see my sister happier than this. Her once stormy eyes were now sparkling with delight. I didn't know why she loved guns. We had learnt how to use them when we worked for some retired soldiers turned robbers back

in the day, but she became more obsessed with weapons than I was. Ladies weren't meant to love violence. They should leave such nefarious things to the blokes out there.

"Are you serious?" Her voice resembled that of a child who was bought a packet of sweet biscuits. The difference was that biscuits weren't capable of causing havoc and chaos, unless we were talking about countless toilet visits. The sweetness of those things was deadly!

I sighed in defeat. "I am serious. However, why do you want that gun? You have more than enough. The bloody gun costs fifty thousand dollars! We can't be spending that much."

She smirked. "Says the man who owns a 2010 Lexus LFA."

She caught me off guard. Who could blame me? That car was elegant, and I dreamt of it for four days before finally purchasing it. It came as a surprise to my sister because she knew I was not too fond of outrageous spending.

I shrugged off my suit jacket, revealing my black waistcoat. It was getting unnecessarily hot in here. Rolling up my sleeves, I tossed my jacket onto my coat hanger.

"I agree; I might have overspent a little on that car." I undid my tie and dragged it off, throwing it onto a desk holding a stack of files.

My sister's gaze declined to the concrete floor. Before that happened, a flicker of something I presumed to be sadness, which was like the innermost depth of the sea, flashed in her eyes. She was worried about something.

"What bothers you?" I asked, moving closer.

"Don't you think we should stop what we're doing? You're a billionaire, Arthur; we have more than enough."

Did she hit her head somewhere while I was away? Why would she utter such nonsensical words? This *thing* we were doing put food on our plates when we had nothing.

"Have you forgotten this *thing* was how we survived in the streets of London after our beloved uncle threw us out?"

"I know. But, you've been doing it so easily and never been caught. Don't you think we may run out of luck someday?"

Luck? This was no bloody luck! We worked hard for this. Everything we had, we worked hard for it. It was our genius that got us to this point!

I raked my hair in frustration. "You think this is luck, eh? Where are your bloody senses, sister?! Where was luck when we sold the Eiffel Tower three times? Hm?" I opened my hands. "I didn't see Lady Luck smiling at us when we stole two million pounds from a gang in Liverpool! So for once, be bloody thankful for how far we've achieved and don't fucking give a single credit to Lady Luck!"

She shoved the monitor on the desk to the ground, the screen scattering to shards. Imagine this lady! "I'm just caring for you! You don't have to be a fucking arsehole and yell at the top of your lungs!"

I clicked my tongue and stared at the broken monitor on the ground. That cost three thousand American dollars. Now I had to replace it. I had almost forgotten how physical my sister got when she was pissed off. To avoid any more outrageous spending next time, I would have to ensure we only argued where there were no breakable things.

"I'm sorry about the desktop; I snapped." Her voice was firm, and I could genuinely sense her remorse.

I blew out air. "It's alright, love. You were only looking out for me." I hit the inside of my teeth with my tongue and looked at her. She was sitting on the desk, her head down, her eyes looking up at me. *How could you stay angry at this cute muffin?*

I smiled and spread my arms. "I would like to state that I would be interested in a warm hug from my beautiful sister."

She blushed and took two steps forward, embracing me tightly. Dear Dickens, I had forgotten she was sweating earlier. The hug wasn't as enjoyable as the ones before it, all thanks to her sticky skin.

"I love you, dickhead."

"I wish I could say the same. You are in no way of resemblance to a man." I groaned as she pinched my back. "Alright! I love you too."

At the end of the day, I had only one prayer. All I wanted was never to see the American from the cafe again. But from what I saw displayed today, she seemed like the rebellious type.

She was definitely going to call.

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Chapter 5

ARTHUR

"Tell me, Mathew, what do you see when you look into my eyes?"

I saw money. I saw a room full of gold bars and green paper. But don't get confused; I wasn't in the room of my dreams yet.

Instead, I was in a dining space with floral wallpapers and an all-golden dining set. A French window overlooked a balustraded balcony, the chirps of birds still feeble at this time. An opulent sideboard was against the wall, and an ornate staircase at the corner of the room curled up to a higher floor.

Ms. Hannah, the wealthy owner of this manor, tilted her head to the side, awaiting the reply to the question she asked earlier. Her black eyes were fixed on me, and I could tell she was lost in love. Well, I gave her the bloody answer any lady in love wished to hear from her man.

"My never-ending love for you, Ms. Hannah." I held her slightly wrinkled hand and planted a gentle kiss on it. She blushed and averted her eyes to the cup of tea before her.

At fifty, she looked remarkable. She possessed golden hair that gleamed as the sun's rays struck them and peach-coloured lips that had darkened with age. The pearl hanging on her neck was what I deemed the most attractive. That jewel must be worth a fortune. She noticed how I looked at her, and heat rose to her cheeks again. She got the wrong message. I wasn't looking at her breasts!

This lady!

"Stop looking at me that way, Mathew. You're making me blush."

"I was admiring your beauty, Ms. Hannah," I lied. "You look stunning, I must say." The only thing I found stunning, aside from the pearl necklace on her neck, was her money.

"Stop it," she dragged her words and then sipped from her teacup. Hell's bloody bells! This was too easy! If she for once thought I was truly in love with her, she must be off her rocker.

Ms. Hannah, my client, was a divorcee and recently began showing interest in younger men. But none of these geezers lasted a month with her. If I were to guess, they probably had their heels on their backs when they discovered her disturbing interest in animals. But of all these bachelors, I was the most suitable gentleman for this fine lady. And I was also the most eligible to take her riches. And it would be done with a simple trick: charity.

"So, I was wondering, when would you consider giving the money you promised for my charity foundation?"

"Oh, that!" She exclaimed, her eyes shining as if she had remembered something of great importance. She put on a warm smile and massaged the top of my hand with her thumb. "Very soon, love. My company's sales aren't going well."

I didn't bloody care. She had promised the money two months ago and always came up with a silly excuse. I had gotten tired of making animal sounds to please her. Every single day, I had been asking myself how hearing the crow of a cock made her aroused. There had to be some biological explanation for such an abnormality.

"My love, you sounded very strange yesterday. Almost like a woman." Blimey, would you look at that? This was the first clever observation she had ever made since I knew her. Maybe Americans weren't that dumb after all.

I came up with a quick answer for her. "Oh, that. I'm afraid I came down with a fever last night. But I feel very fine now."

My sister didn't look fine when she was twating her poor punching bag. Poor girl had to sound like an animal to please this weird lady and to cover up for me. She was such a sweet girl underneath a rough exterior.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Concern compressed Ms. Hannah's voice to a whisper.

"I'm blinding!" A charming smile stretched on my lips. "I'm more than okay."

"Well, that's a relief."

She cleared her throat and interlocked her fair hands. Blood rose to her rosy cheeks. No, no, no. She had that expression whenever she wanted to request her daily special. Couldn't she, for once, get knackered of these dodgy requests?

"Love..." She played with the fabric of the white dress she wore.

She was about to ask for it. Bugger!

What was it going to be this time, eh? I surely didn't want to sound like a horse. She had better not tell me to squeak like a rat. I was going to lose the plot if she dared that again!

"C-can you moo like a cow?"

A cow? A bloody cow?! I was done for. How did I ever get a client like this? My former ones were normal and didn't like animals as much as this lady did. It was people like Ms. Hannah that always justified my logic about Americans. They truly were dumb.

"Honey, won't you do it?" she asked. Her eyes were looming with sadness, like a child that was denied a package of sweet biscuits.

Think about the money, Arthur. One hundred million dollars is a lot. You have to do it for the money!

Curse my inner mind. It knew how much I loved money and decided to torment me with it. Surely, it would cause me no harm if I decided to do another imitation. After this one, I was undoubtedly going to postpone our meetings, and anytime she asked for an imitation over the phone, I would play her some animal sounds I downloaded from the Internet. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of that before!

Clearing my throat, I opened my mouth to speak. And of all the billions in the world, the universe chose me as the winner of today's Lady Luck contest.

My bloody phone rang.

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Chapter 6

ARTHUR

I held up a finger. "Excuse me, love."

Quickly, like a cheetah, I sprang out of my seat and moved briskly to the window at the end of the room. I didn't bother looking at the phone to know my caller. All that mattered was that this person would buy me more minutes before I returned to my torture.

Picking up the call, I placed the phone on my ear. "Hello."

"*Wassup*, Con."

For a nanosecond, I thought I was talking to a snake because of the emphasis that had been placed on the 's'. But that voice! It was too lively and American to belong to my sister. So, who was it then?

"Don't remember me, Mr. Atkinson?"

It was the bloody American from yesterday! To put it correctly, it was the lady with smelly feet. She wanted to torment me some more, didn't she? I looked over my shoulder at the other weird American seated at the table, waiting for my call to end so I could moo like a cow. This was my doom. I was about to receive a double dose of American craziness!

You could put your head to use.

Thank you, inner mind, for telling me something I'd been doing for years. I very much appreciated it.

You're welcome.

Blast you! That was sarcasm. I sighed and looked outside the window, overlooking my client's large mass of green plains. Then, a clever idea smashed into my brain like a moving train that couldn't be stopped.

"Mr. Atkinson, I know you're still there." If I knew better, she was smiling with that devilish grin of hers. The one that sent a slither down my spine yesterday.

"Oh, forgive me, Mr. Linton, you were saying?"

I prayed to dear God for this unbelievable lady to understand where I was heading with this.

"Who the hell are calling Mr. Lin—Ohhhh! You this deceitful motherfucker!"

"I would very much like you to rephrase that last word. I never did such a horrible thing to my mother." *And she died years ago after Jane was born. Thank you very much for reminding me about that. How pleasing it was to go down memory lane.*

"You're scamming someone now, aren't you?" She sounded so excited, like she had caught me in the act again. I knew it: torture.

My eyes widened. "Of course not, Mr. Linton!"

She cackled like an evil villain about to wreak havoc on an innocent protagonist, which I represented in this situation. What was she going to do this time? She had threatened to report me to the police. But if she did, she wouldn't have called me.

Or maybe she did and just called to laugh at your misfortune.

This little vixen! That couldn't be true, could it? Annoyed that she was still laughing hideously at me, I decided to speak again.

"Why are you laughing, Mr. Linton?"

"I'm sorry, this is just fun." She giggled. She bloody giggled!

"You're taking pleasure in doing this, aren't you?"

She took a deep breath. "You don't know the half of it."

Annoying, yes.

Cunning, yes.

Devil, yes.

American, yes, and the list went on. She was indeed enjoying this. I never knew someone could find so much joy in another person's annoyance.

"Mr. Linton, I'm sorry I couldn't attend the meeting. Should I be coming now?"

She laughed again. This time, louder. I had to shift the phone an inch from my ear lest I would turn deaf. In fact, she was so loud that my beloved Ms. Hannah locked her brows, puzzled. A man's voice was definitely not that soft. Especially not Mr. Linton's.

"You'll be meeting me in that same spot as yesterday." She sounded very commanding. I didn't particularly appreciate taking orders. And worst of all, it was coming from a lady.

"I'm afraid not."

"Why?

Firstly, because I didn't revisit a place where I had scammed someone, and secondly, you are a lady; you wouldn't tell me what to do.

Of course, I didn't tell her that. "Professional reasons."

That was a well-summarised answer.

"You mean scamming reasons. That's your profession, remember?"

Never in my life had I felt like pouncing on a lady and tearing her to shreds. Fuck! She made me vexed to my bloody marrows. I clenched my jaw, trying to suppress my growing anger. But I would not let a woman win me in a verbal showdown. I would show her I was a man and wouldn't fall for her feminine tricks!

"Call it whatever you want, Mr. Linton. So where are we to meet? I'm afraid I can't go to the place you mentioned before."

"Hmm..." Her tone was a lot more serious now, like she was genuinely thinking. Would you look at that? Miss Smelly Feet actually had a few brain cells to think! After all her nonsensical acts, there was no way any average human would think she had *anything* up there.

While she was busy thinking, I looked over my shoulder once more to see Ms. Hannah. She wasn't looking too happy. Her fists were curled, and a tight frown was on her face. She must hate Mr. Linton now. After all, he was the one who had cut me off when I was about to do an imitation.

"Meet me at my house then. I'll send you directions."

Her words cut off my thoughts of Ms. Hannah. Did I hear well? She said her house, didn't she? I couldn't just walk into a stranger's house. Who knew if the bloody police were waiting for me there?

"There must be some other place, Mr. Linton. Maybe a restaurant, I suppose?" There was no way in hell I would go to her house.

"Ahh! I see, you don't trust me."

"Affirmative, Mr. Linton." Who would trust a lady who threatened to turn them in?

But she didn't.

She may have done it! Weren't you the one who told me that?

Opinions can change.

I massaged my forehead. This was getting me nowhere.

Of course.

Alright, that was enough. *Off you go! Shoo! You should only speak when you are needed.* And like a perfectly behaved inner mind it was, it went off. Now, back to the main problem at hand. Should I trust this mad lady or not?

"Mr. Atkinson?" The vixen teased my name like she knew I was battling myself internally.

"Yes, Mr. Linton?"

"If you feel you can't trust me, remember I know what you did. I haven't told the police. If I had told them, I wouldn't be on this call with you."

There was a tad bit of sense in what she said. But still, she could have the police waiting for me in her home. It was a risky move.

"So, what is it going to be, Mr. Atkison?" She put a lot of emphasis on the 's'. *Christ's sake, lady! You're not a bloody serpent!* Well, she was, but not in literal terms. She clicked her tongue. "Would you come and visit me, or would you prefer to stay where you are, with whoever it is you are trying to avoid?"

So she finally deciphered it! Took her long enough. Maybe she had a brain up there, but it was definitely not a big one. I still disagreed with the dumb scientists who claimed that the brain of a woman was larger than that of a man. Can you imagine such nonsense? Men were superior in all aspects. Women simply couldn't measure up.

I glanced at Ms. Hannah. She was a good reason for my logic, and I needed to get away from her. But Miss Smelly Feet could've been planning something with the police too. Closing my eyes and blowing out air, I made my decision.

"I'll be there."

"Swear on your honour as a British gentleman." She teased me further.

I narrowed my eyes and grinded my teeth together. "I swear."

"Good boy."

Something about the way she said that made my stomach flutter with butterflies. *Fuck me.* I hated my body for reacting the way it did. Nevertheless, I had to go see this pest so I could finally hear what she had to say and maybe, just maybe, she would stop being a thorn in my side.

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Chapter 7

ARTHUR

As cheesy as this shall sound, I was out of that manor before Ms. Hannah could say Jack Robinson. Of course, my dear animal lover wasn't happy to see me go. Part of me wanted to thank Smelly Feet. But I bottled that part up and threw it into the bloody Thames! Even in consciousness and unconsciousness, I would never make a lady think she saved me. Never! A man should always be able to save himself.

But you are *going to meet her, are you not?*

I was. Indeed, I was. I told her I would, and if I didn't, that wouldn't make me much of a gentleman, would it? Men always stuck to their principles. Unlike those feminine creatures who constantly changed their words like they didn't matter.

I guess you're right, that nasty voice inside my mind said.

I always was. A speed bump I hit jerked the thoughts out of my head. So, she lived in this neighbourhood? A large block of flats lined the street's length. Trees were stationed at the edge of the pavement, spilling their long shadow on the road. Not bad for someone who dressed the way she did.

What was her flat number again?

A32.

Aha! Thank you, my dear subconscious. I narrowed my eyes by an inch and focused them on the brown doors. Each of them was a carbon copy of the other.

A30.

A31.

There it was. *A32*. Two pilasters flanked the door, the flowers on her porch withered, their dried petals falling to their loamy grave. That was what happened when your owner wasn't dependable. And it was always worse when they had smelly feet. It could've been the stench that killed those poor ornamental plants.

I parked my Lexus LFA before her porch and stepped out. Just before I could raise my gaze, a creak of wood rippled in the air. And then our eyes locked. She stood at her door in an oversized jumper large enough to cover an entire settee, her hands locked together at her back. A smile that was bright enough to rival the sun glowed on her face.

She looks kinder.

Bah! Those were tricks! Feminine tricks, I tell you! She was like a siren, luring me in with her song . A song that I knew all too well.

But look at that pretty smile and those sparkling black eyes. Surely, she must be harmless.

What in the name of Midas would make my inner mind think of such rubbish? She was a vixen. A conniving witch! I was certain she had her cauldron boiling inside her house.

"Ah, Mr. Atkinson," she said my fake name so warmly that I was beginning to doubt she was the same person from yesterday. *Hello?* This was Smelly Feet. What happened to her mischievous smile, her sly gaze and her—

You know her too well already.

Triple blast you! I didn't know her too well. These were just everyday things anyone with intellect such as mine would notice.

"Still don't trust me enough to come into my house?" she asked. It came as a surprise to me, but she actually managed to sound hurt. By George, she must've been a bloody good actor! It was so convincing that any stupid person, primarily American, would believe her.

"Apparently so," I said firmly.

"You swore on your honour as a gentleman to come. I'm positive that British men take their honour very seriously."

I said it: vixen! She was up to her cunning ways again, using my policy against me. But her special smile hadn't come up yet. It was still the regular warm smile that somehow made me feel at ease.

Feel at ease? Are you bloody insane, Arthur? Chop! Chop! Snap out of it! She's a vixen, Arthur! A bloody American Vixen! Don't feel at ease when you're around such a person.

I hesitated to speak, clearing my throat. Who knew my honour as a Gentleman would betray me? Times were indeed changing.

"I suppose you are right," I said, almost in defeat. *Almost*. She hadn't won the war yet. All she had were her feminine tricks, and I had my artillery, something many women wouldn't understand how to use. They were a different kind of specimen, after all.

She smiled broader this time, the sinister intention flashing and disappearing in the blink of an eye.

"Then come inside." She grinned, nearly blinding me with her pearly white teeth. "I don't bite."

You do, but not in literal terms. Your conniving claws were deadly enough to tear down the scales of an alligator. Blimey, those blasted legs of mine decided to have a mind of their own and took two steps forward. What was I doing? Walking to my doom eagerly was the first sign that I was *already* doomed. With each step I took, the evil ulterior motive hiding behind Smelly Feet's eyes began to uncover slowly.

While my feet did what they chose to do, I texted my sister.

Dear twin sister, in case I don't return in the next hour, bear in mind that the bobbies have apprehended me. Also, don't think of saving me. Just transfer the money from my account and run away.

Your handsome brother,

Arthur.

I knew she would lose her plot when she saw the message. She might smash anything around her, and I prayed to Mother Mary that she wouldn't be in the parlour. If not, I would have to think of buying another Television set, that was, if I made it out of this situation alive.

Raising my gaze, Smelly Feet's dark, mischievous eyes locked with mine, and she smirked. It was the type of smirk Moses' face would have had when he divided the Red Sea. She was feeling like she was on top of the world, which was impossible. No lady could rule the world when men were still roaming this earth.

"Come on in, Mr. Atkinson." The sly smile emerged, making a massive lump form in my throat. I was completely and utterly doomed. "We have a lot to talk

about."

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Chapter 8

ARTHUR

"Welcome to my humble home."

Barnacles, did she take a full gallon of brandy? She dared call *this* humble. If this was humility, I denounced it. Her apartment was an open floor and a bloody mess. When I said a mess, I truly meant a *mess*.

Her kitchen sink was full of unwashed dishes, and flies hovered above the eyesore. And, of course, the bloody sink leaked water into a bucket she had placed under it. Spilled on her bed were all sorts of paper you could think of: newspapers, magazines, journals, even tissue paper! The only good thing about this house was that not a single police officer was in sight. She didn't betray me after all.

"Humble indeed," I said, trying my best not to sound sarcastic. It didn't work. How did I expect it to work? The house was genuinely horrible; even rats had lived in houses better than this.

"You don't have to sound polite." She scratched the back of her chaotic hair that she had left to plummet to her back. Her eyes wandered to her brimmed bathtub. I could swear on my two knockers that it must've been white before. "This house is surely a major downgrade from my former house."

Downgrade? Even a pigsty had seen better days! My gaze panned to the ceiling. She had used white tape to tie her broken bulb. A shudder ran through my body. This was absolute poverty!

You don't have to be rude.

Yes, I didn't. I should smile like a naive little child and watch this pretty sight before me. How wise of you, subconscious.

You're we—

Don't you dare complete that sentence! That was sarcasm. Sarcasm!

And like that, it was off. Sometimes, I considered myself mad to be talking to my inner mind. But it helped most times. Especially in horrible situations like

these. At least I got to distract myself from such a *hideous* sight.

"Please, make yourself at home," she said, pointing at her brown settee, the only neat thing in this house. It was avant-garde.

Rushing to it like it was the safest place in this monstrosity, I took cover in the comfort of the cushion. Smelly Feet's footsteps thudded around the house, and I was so glad she had worn slippers. It was the first reasonable thing she had ever done.

"Want some *tea*?" she asked, priority in the last word. She was teasing me, wasn't she?

"No, I don't."

"I thought British people loved *tea*." She was trying her best to sound cockney but ended up with nothing but her usual American accent.

"Apparently not all of them."

"I see." Ruffles and footsteps sounded behind me. What was she doing? Surely she wasn't searching for spells to hex me, was she? I mean, she was a witch, after all. "You're sure you don't want some *tea*?"

"No, I don't, and can you please stop that?"

"What?" She succeeded in pretending that she didn't have a single idea about what I was saying.

"The tea stuff."

"Oh, you mean the *tea*?"

Of course not. "I meant your mother."

"Sorry?"

"I said beautiful weather," I lied, looking outside the high windows buffeted by a strong wind.

Just then, she rounded me with a recorder and a newspaper roll. What was all that for?

She looked outside her windows and locked her brows. "You call this beautiful? It's fucking windy outside."

I ignored her, all my focus on the recording device. She wasn't going to interview me, was she?

"Are you a reporter?" The words flew out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Was." She sighed and sat on the floor next to me. *Was?* If she wasn't a reporter anymore, why did she have a recording device in her hand? She casually dropped it on the coffee table and crossed her legs. "I got fired a few weeks ago."

Oh! Who knew what she did? Maybe her previous boss couldn't take her attitude and sacked her immediately. After all, nobody would want to work with an annoying vixen like her.

"Good gracious, that's so sad," I said, phoney pity stitched to my voice.

"Screw them." She shrugged her shoulders. "I have something better."

What could be better than losing your job? "Oh really? How exciting."

"Yeah, and I need your help."

Her voice came out sad, almost as if she had been drowning in a sea of grief. Maybe she wasn't acting this time. Perhaps she did need my help. But why?

"I don't exactly know what you need my help for. Maybe if you could elucidate, I would understand."

She snorted. "You're too formal. I don't like it."

How convenient; I don't seem to like your sly nature either. "I'm sorry, Miss. I guess formality is too much for *certain* people."

"What are you trying to say, mister?" she inquired, narrowing her eyes by an inch.

That you were among the certain people? Americans and their brain glitches.

"I clearly said sorry in my sentence. From what I know, that indicates an apology."

A muscle in her jaw twitched. Ha! I finally pissed her off. Let her have a taste of her own medicine. But I was too quick to celebrate. That expression curved into her devious smile. It was almost as if the devil was hiding behind her face. What did she have planned this time?

"Apology accepted."

I loosened my tie and unhooked the buttons of my overcoat. The uncertainty of what she had planned made heat well up in me. Curse you, vixen! Curse you! Curse—

Don't you think that's enough curses for one person?

I suppose, but she was a vixen! Always up to no good. Just like the way she blackmailed me to come here.

"Ever heard of the Association?"

"Which one?" I asked. There were many associations across the world.

She did a facepalm. Did I do something wrong? "No, not what I meant. Like these people, they call themselves the Association."

A very sensible name to name an association.

"And let me guess, this association, are they mostly Americans?"

Her eyes went wide in amazement as she gasped. She later composed herself and asked, "What makes you think so?"

They were Americans. Only they would be stupid enough to name an association, *the Association.*

"Just a gut feeling," I said, crossing my leg over my lap.

The way her black eyes scrutinised me, even a blind possum would get the message. My answer didn't do much to convince her.

She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. "Why, Mr. Atkinson?"

Can you believe this lady? I just told her it was a gut feeling. What more did she want to hear?

"I told you, a gut feeling."

"I don't believe in gut feelings."

I shrugged. "Well, I do."

"Your opinion doesn't matter."

It bloody does! I was a man, and my opinion mattered, no matter the circumstance. What did a *woman* know about what mattered and what didn't? I drew in a deep breath, sucking all my anger and quenching it inside my lungs by detoxification. Let this mad lady not forget that I was here because of my honour as a gentleman. On a typical spiffing day, I wouldn't be here.

"Can we get on to the main reason I'm here?" I asked.

Giving me one last look, she unrolled the newspaper and spread it over the coffee table. They were all different newspapers but had one thing in common: Money. Well, this was getting interesting. I carefully read the headlines.

Head of UNICEF complains they didn't receive half the money the United States promised.

Nigerian government budgets 21.6 billion naira for mosquito nets.

I'll be damned! I continued reading.

Fifty thousand soldiers die due to lack of good food supply. The soldiers claim their superiors didn't use the money given to them by the U.S government.

This was outrageous. These governments had done what I had deemed impossible. This was mass theft. I was impressed!

"What do all these newsletters have in common?" Smelly Feet asked, her dark eyes glancing at me.

"Money." I replied bluntly.

She clicked her tongue. "You're impossible, you know?"

"Really?" I asked, my brow elevated. "I didn't quite notice it."

Denying me any comebacks, she sighed. "All these are connected to this one association. If I were to assume, I would say they controlled the government."

I knew she was a mad, cunning troublemaker, but I never thought she would be absolutely ridiculous. How could *one* association control governments across the world? If someone had a power like that, they would be more powerful than the Queen was!

"Don't you think your assumption is a bit over the cherry?" I asked, crossing my arms.

"No." She frowned. "I even have proof."

"Show me, then."

Sending me a dark look, she held up her recording device. What was she going to prove with that? She waved it before my eyes like I was too long-sighted to see it.

I flinched, sending my head backwards. "I can clearly see it, Miss. Just explain what the bloody thing has to do with this situation."

"Don't tell me what to do," she hissed like a venomous snake. Her venom was her words and sly nature.

"While working, I interviewed someone I think is a member of this association. His name is Justin McCarthy. He's a wealthy mogul and, luckily for me, also a talkative fella."

I gave her a look that meant, *'Go on then!'*

"This is what he had to say." She pressed a button on the recording device, and it made a crackling noise.

The noise stopped, and the room was as quiet as ever. The only sound was the ripple the water in the bucket made as droplets fell from the sink.

Then, the interview began.

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Chapter 9

ARTHUR

There was a sudden lull in the room.

The crackling of the recording device obliterated the silence. A throat was cleared, and there was a screech.

"Sorry for the delay, Miss Michaelson," the deep, timbre voice trembled the recorder's speaker.

Michaelson. I held a brow high and looked at the little vixen on the floor. That wasn't a bad name for an American.

"No apologies necessary, Mr. McCarthy."

Incredulously, my eyes widened by an inch. She sounded polite! Very polite! So I wasn't the only one she tricked. She had succeeded in making this man think she was a sane woman!

"So, Mr. McCarthy, based on your tweet from a week ago, it's safe to assume that you support the government on the recent accusations of money laundering."

There was a slight hesitation before his reply. "Yes. I mean, it's not like there's some secret place they stash the money. The government does their part, and it's all left for citizens to do theirs."

Suspicious, I must say. I had never seen anyone support their government wholeheartedly without having an ulterior motive. Sometimes, it could be that they wanted to get into the good books of the system—especially those fat politicians.

"So, you mean there's a secret place where the government stashes the money they launder?" she asked, her voice firm and professional. She did speak eloquently.

But the man hadn’t said what she accused. So why twist his words? I could see the smile curl up her lips from the corner of my eyes. She was about to play

that game. And based on the few hours I'd known her, I'd bet a thousand dollars that she would win it.

Why not a million?

She wasn't worth it. I couldn't bet such a fortune on a woman.

"I never said there was a secret place," the man's voice was laced with confusion.

"But if there were, you would deny it this way." She said accusingly.

"What are you saying? If there were such a thing, it would need an association to control it!"

"Ah! So that means there's an association in charge of this laundered money." Her tone was taut with excitement. She was enjoying every moment of this.

Devil.

"What are you saying?" The man yelled. "There's no way an association would keep such money for the government!"

Over the recorder, I could hear her stifled laugh. The man had fallen prey, and she, the predator, was ready to drain every ounce of information from him.

"Why are you upset, Mr. McCarthy? I mean, this is just an interview. Unless..." Clothes shuffled, "you don't like the fact that I'm getting the truth out of you."

"Get out of my office." His timbre voice was low, a thin haze masking his annoyance.

"Mr. McCarthy," she dragged on, only to be interrupted by a thunderous yell.

"Get out!"

Miss Michaelson stretched her arms and switched off the recorder. "And that's how I lost my job."

Oh no, that was the saddest thing ever. Someone as sweet and kind as you didn't deserve such a thing.

"That's very sad," I said, trying my best to look concerned. Her sly nature was making it hard for me. "You don't deserve such a thing."

She looked at me intently, her eyes simmering in rage. "If you want to insult me, you can be straightforward about it. Tell me everything bad you have to say about me."

Trust me, Love, you don't want that.

"What would make you think so horribly about me?" I gasped, resting a hand on my chest. "I'm only expressing my deepest concerns."

She sprung from the floor, grabbing her recorder and newspaper with both hands, a frown on her face. "You can take your concern and stick it up your British ass." She strolled past me, heading to the darker part of the room—the part where the mess built a kingdom of its own.

I couldn't help it; a smile curled my lips. "You shouldn't be using such foul language, Miss Michaelson."

A snort.

I grinned wider; I was enjoying this.

"So, is this the proof?" I elevated my brow. "Surely, you don't think I'm convinced by this."

She strolled past me again, sinking into the settee. "Would you shut up and let me finish?"

My brows lifted in shock, my mouth ajar. Believe me, the words that ran through my mind were more than enough to make the devil's jaws drop. My jaw muscles tightened, begging me not to say any of those words. It wouldn't deem me a perfect gentleman, a title I was willing to preserve as long as I lived.

"I'm sorry, Miss Michaelson." A lacklustre smile stretched my lips. "Continue."

She removed her slippers and crossed both legs on the furniture.

Dear God!

This time, the smell was hot and intoxicating. I moved to the far end of the seat, away from that atrocity!

Not knowing how she made me suffer, she spoke. "This is all I have for now. But if we can get inside McCarthy's office, I'm sure we could find something useful."

I batted my eyelids and stared at her, disbelief washing over me. She was mad, crazier than the Mad Hatter. She didn't even have concrete proof! By George, I was just wasting my precious time.

"How about the association you were talking about? The American confraternity of idiots? The huge sum of money you claimed they possess? Do you mind clarifying that part of the story?"

She scratched the back of her neck. "It's a hypothesis. I'm not sure, but I just have a feeling it's true."

God help me. "A hypothesis? You brought me here for a hypothesis?"

"Look, there's a massive money flow happening here. First of all, funds disappear into thin air, and banks report dozens of cash just wiping out of their customer accounts. Doesn't that sound a bit suspicious?"

"I do not give a bloody fig about what the government does." I tilted my head. "And I do remember you saying you don't believe in gut feelings, but you are doing the exact thing at this moment."

She rolled her eyes. *Bloody hypocrite.*

"Think of it this way, you knobhead. If indeed there's a massive flow of cash that has no traces and you *do* find it, you can steal enough money to put you out of business."

Goodness gracious, she was rather pertinent in her words. But I won't let a vixen like her trick me into doing her will. Never! I might as well drown myself in the smelly Thames. That seemed quite adequate.

"I'm not interested."

There was a screech from outside. I stood from my seat and moved over to her window. Two black SUVs were parked down the road, and the men coming out of them were wearing black glasses. I'd watched enough cliche American action movies with horrible characters to know who those fools were.

"Does McCarthy know your home?" I asked, closing the curtain.

Smelly Feet raised her brow. "He was my boss. I guess the company would have my personal details. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, God. You're rather foolish."

"Don't insult me in my house."

"Well, you better control your bloody mouth before I let you die in your house."

"Huh?"

"Pick the essentials you think you can't survive without." I watched over my shoulder and saw her gaping at me like a moron. "Be quick with it!"

"You don't get to order me around in my house either."

I covered my face with a hand. "There are over six men coming to your apartment, all dressed in black suits and black glasses. Quite cliché if you ask me."

"Why are they coming to my house?" she asked, walking towards her window.

I blocked her view, arms spread out wide. If they were to look through the window and see her, they would storm in immediately. It was a pity she was stuck with me. Now, I would have to stain my precious Italian leather and perfect Savile Row.

"What do you think would happen when you stick your nose in waters you're not meant to?" I asked.

"I'll get more information."

"McCarthy clearly has friends in high places who have been sent to exterminate you. So either you trust me and shut up, or I leave you to die in here."

"That's just bullshit."

"You're a target now, Smelly Feet."

"What? That's not my name."

"Your name is what bothers you at this moment?"

Unbelievable. Just unbelievable. I had managed to put myself in a messy situation with a dumb American. It had to be what they put in their food. Perhaps their burgers or pizzas. Just whatever it was that had made their thinking process very slow.

A bang came at the door.

She opened her mouth to scream, but I clamped it shut with my hand. "Go and get your belongings. *Now*."

She nodded this time. Oh, so she could be subservient? She should have kept acting like a bloody fish, and I would let her face her fate. Unfortunately, I was a gentleman and was inclined to protect a lady.

I pulled out my gun from the back of my suit jacket.

It's time to teach these blokes a lesson.

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Chapter 10

OCTAVIA

Hands shaking, I rushed to my bed, regretting at the moment why I had dabbled in a matter that was none of my fucking business. But that was my job as a reporter: to dig deep and to report. We were paid for that. But McCarthy was hiding something, and it was in my nature to want to know more.

My obsession to stop corrupt officials had gotten the best of me. It was challenging to think straight when the cause of my parents' death was because of the decisions people like McCarthy made.

They had died in a plane crash. The plane was poorly maintained because the official in charge of plane maintenance fees in the government stole the money and asked the aviation company to go ahead and fly the faulty piece of shit.

How could I be so foolish? I couldn't believe I didn't think this through. Of course, they would send people after me! I didn't know anything, but I had an idea, and that was enough for them to send an entire army in my direction. My assumptions of being watched finally turned out to be true.

My fingers slipped through the mess of papers on my bed, trying to find my journal and other essential things like my camera. After what felt like an eternity, I finally found it.

The door banged loudly once more. They were nearing in, and subconsciously, I felt that there was nothing that Atkinson could do about it. I narrowed my eyes at his hand. He had a gun.

Wait, what?!

"You brought a gun into my house?!" I asked, my eyes wide open.

He lifted a brow. "Did you perhaps believe that I would enter the dungeon of a witch without being fortified?"

"A witch? You're calling me a fucking witch?! First Smelly Feet, now this. Unbelievable."

"Well, listen, you cockerel. If we do not manage to leave here before they barge in, I'm afraid I will have to make a mess." He scrunched up his nose and looked around the room. "It's not like there's much neatness to begin with."

"Fuck you."

"I'm afraid I do not dabble with dirty women. Especially ones with smelly fe—"

The door barged open, and spears of torchlight roamed my dark corridor. Atkinson pushed me to the bed.

Can you believe this madman?

"Hide under the bed."

"It reeks."

"Well, whose fault is that?"

Why was he good at pointing out my issues? The life of a reporter who left their home as early as 4 am and returned as late as 10 pm didn't give them much time to clean up their house. It was unfair to be judged because of it.

I crawled under my bed, the smell of my unwashed socks killing me. *Shit*. If I survived this, I would have to clean this house. It reeked, but not as much as Atkinson claimed it did.

Under the bed, I could only see his gleaming dark shoes, which clacked with each footstep he made. For a moment, the room echoed with the whispers of silence.

And how fucking wrong I was.

A gunshot boomed through the room. My ears bled like I was close to a ringing church bell. Was this how loud a gun was? Imagine the sort of damage it could inflict. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end.

Grunts.

More grunts.

A gunshot.

More gunshots.

Flashes of light with each gunshot.

A head landed on the foot of the bed with a gaping red hole in the middle of the forehead. I wailed, rushing out of the floor and huddling myself into a corner, my arms across my knees. What came next was far more flabbergasting.

Atkinson. His movements were divine, dodging each punch like it was a thread he could see and manipulate at his own will. He held one of the intruders by their arms, locked between his armpit, and shot a bullet down the man's throat, spurts of blood splashing in his face.

The limp corpse slipped off his body, and he pulled out a white handkerchief, wiping his face clean with it. A wave of shock coursed through my body once I spotted the pool of blood spreading across my floor.

He certainly made a mess.

Shallow breaths consumed my lungs, and my shoulders were stiff as I cuddled up to myself. I couldn't believe I had just witnessed this. This man wasn't *just* a thief; he was also a killer. Two deadly combos that made him dangerous to be around and so fuck my life, I chose him as my helper for my goal. How stupid could I get?

"Miss Michaelson, we should get going," he said, opening the curtains and looking outside. "I've eliminated them, but more will come."

"Y-you killed them. "

"Splendid, it seems your brain is in peak condition. Now up you go, let's depart."

"You *killed* them."

He shifted his gaze to me, his oceanic eyes softening briefly like the calm after a storm. Licking his lower lip, he held the bridge of his nose and cursed.

"She's in shock."

Of course, I'm in shock, you fool.

"I just saw you kill people."

"Well, technically, you heard me since you were under the bed."

Once I can get myself to rest, I swear I'm going to kill this man.

He covered our distance and squatted, his hands holding my cheeks. Despite the strong scent of iron filling the air, his soft, woody scent still engulfed me, offering a brief moment of respite.

"Hey, you're going to be fine."

"No, no—"

"Hey, you are going to be—"

"No, no, no, you killed," I panted, "you killed people."

"No, those weren't people; they were the bad guys. The evil villain sent his henchmen to kill you, and I helped you survive."

"You killed them. Why did you kill them?"

"They came to hurt you, Ms Michealson. And no one hurts a lady under my watch." He wiped off the blood on his hands with a white handkerchief. "Besides, a gentleman must always protect a lady, even if it means killing for them."

My breaths became short. I couldn't take it.

"You killed them."

"Okay, this is taking too much time."

He touched the nape of my neck, and slowly, my vision faded, and darkness consumed me.

***

The soft thrumming of an engine woke me up. Rays of light cast on my face, and it didn't take long for me to feel the spit drooling down from the corner of my mouth. I shot my brain to full power, trying to understand my surroundings. A glass was by my side, and speeding past me were fields full of grains and barn houses in the distance.

I looked to my side and saw Atkinson, a hand on the steering wheel, his eyes focused on the road ahead. My eyes balled. *My things! My fucking things!*

"Relax, I packed all your belongings before I took off. They're all in the boot."

"My camera?"

He nodded.

"My recorder?"

He nodded and handed me a handkerchief. "Clean that spit all over your face; it's disgusting."

Embarrassment burned my face. I took the handkerchief and wiped my face clean. It was weird seeing him be unusually polite. I had thought he would be the kind of person to leave me hanging dry. Thieves were always untrustworthy.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safe."

I closed my legs together and locked my hands. "Why are you being nice to me?"

"Nice?" He laughed. "I'm just being courteous. A gentleman never leaves a lady in danger. Besides, you may be onto something, and only a fool would turn down an opportunity like this. An opportunity I've been seeking for ages."

"So technically, you only care for the money?"

The realisation struck a nerve, and I was uncertain why. I hated Atkinson and should never bother myself about his thoughts towards me. But at least he could try to be a decent human and care for the welfare of others. It wouldn't hurt him to try.

He didn't answer the question and continued driving. A soreness grew on my neck, and I massaged it. A flashback hit me.

I grinded my teeth and glared at him. "Did you knock me out?"

"Yes."

Gentleman my ass. He wasn't as courteous as he must have thought. *Who the hell just knocks someone out?*

"You were in shock. It was necessary."

"Maybe you would have just let me be in shock."

He shrugged. "The more you speak, the more I realise how splendid of an idea that is."

My vision blurred, and I leaned back in my seat. All that screaming, gunshots, and stress were finally getting to me. Arguing with Atkinson would only make the matter worse.

He made a sharp turn, almost flinging me up to the windshield. However, he placed a hand over my shoulder, forcing me down. The feel of his hard arm over my skin sent quivers down my body, all the way to my core. Perhaps it was the cold.

"Can't you drive sensibly?"

He ignored me.

Pompous fool.

Just because he looked lavishly handsome in his suit and mesmerising when he steered with one hand, that didn't give him the right to be a pain in the ass.

Oh, shit.

I was fawning over this idiot! No, this couldn't happen. I had to think of something terrible about him. I narrowed my eyes, searching my brain for a good

excuse to hate him except for his attitude.

"Are you having a seizure?" he asked, steering into another dirt road.

My face burned. "N-no."

"You look like you're about to take a shit."

"I'm not."

The car stopped, and he exited, going for my belongings and taking them all into one hand with one swift scoop. I followed him, and before us was a large green military-grade aircraft with a back door lowered to form a giant step.

"What is that?"

"An aircraft."

"You stole it?"

"No," he shook his head. "I own it."

Liar. I looked behind me. Was he going to leave his car?

"Your car. Would you—"

A large explosion boomed in the air, the parts of the car flying up with plumes of brownish-red colour.

"You just blew up your car!" I was still watching over my shoulder as I walked with him.

"I cannot afford to be tracked." He exhaled. "And don't worry, I'll just buy another one."

"Jesus."

"Hurry," he said, giving me enough distance, "we want to reach Europe before nightfall."

"Europe?"

"Yeah, we're going to London."

"How do I know you're not going to kill me like the others?"

He ignored my question.

It was a question of who I trusted. Random men who barged into my house or a psychopath thief who saved my life and was surprisingly good at killing people? The choice was obvious.

I know I'm going to regret this.

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Chapter 11

OCTAVIA

The metallic floor below me creaked as I stepped on the aircraft. My eyes widened at the sheer size of it. I entered completely, and a beeping sound rang through the walls. The step we had just scaled raised, shutting close with a hiss.

If there was one question I had to ask, it was why a man who didn't work in the military had a military-grade aircraft with him. Who was Atkinson, and was scamming people all he did? Was there another scary side to him?

I had seen a part of it when I saw how easy it was for him to take the lives of those agents. When it came for him to do the same to me, I doubt he would have any second thoughts about it.

My eyes scanned the structure we had just entered. Ammunition was hanging on the walls, and a series of red flaring lights lined it, as well as multiple buttons I didn't wish to know the function of. The one that surprised me the most, however, was that a box of grenades and TNT sitting next to each other.

"Are you going to war?" I asked, trailing behind him.

He looked over his shoulder at the grenades. "Those are my sister's toys. She has a unique hobby."

"What?"

"Shooting."

I gulped. His sister sounded scarier than him. Logically, I would give my entire life's savings if it meant that I would never have to get anywhere close to a gun or, worse, a grenade. But his sister did this shit for fun.

We passed the first room and entered another. It was a cabin the length of two limousines. There were chairs placed around with a galley at the end. In the middle, a hammock rested, and a lady with fierce blue eyes and well-sculptured biceps watched us, her hands locked together.

She came off the hammock, the sound of her boots hitting the floor sending shock waves of fear through my body. What was this feeling? Not to exaggerate, but I could swear that at that moment, there was a devil with red eyes and an ice-blue aura standing behind her, making my skin crawl.

"She's the one?" she asked, her accent the same as Atkinson's.

"Unfortunately, yes," Atkinson said, settling my belongings in a corner. "Jane, meet Octavia Michaelson. Octavia, meet my sister, Jane."

"Wait, how do you know my name?" How the hell did he know my name? I definitely didn't recall telling him.

"I did my research while you were knocked out."

Understandable. He *was* a thief.

I closed my distance with Jane and extended my hand to shake hers. "Hey, nice to meet you."

Her eyes watched me, a judgmental haze shielding them. For a minute, she didn't shift her gaze, her hands never stretching out to shake mine. Embarrassment flooded through me, and I retreated my hand.

Great, both siblings were assholes. I would keep that note in the back of my mind.

"Why did you bring her here?" Jane asked.

Atkinson collapsed on a chair and exhaled. "She was in danger."

"That wasn't your problem."

My heart clenched. I knew I had never wanted to be in this situation in the first place. But having people be unfair to me only brought back memories of my past. As a child whose parents died and was tossed from one foster home to another, I knew what it felt like to always be left out to die.

Weakness tied my knees, and I would've fallen if I hadn't held onto a support handle by the walls of the aircraft. Was this a bad idea? I mean, I had survived the attacks of the agents, but how long would it take to survive in this new environment where I didn't feel welcome?

"Yo, who's the new baddie?!" A loud Brooklyn accent boomed through the room. My eyes shot wide, and I looked around, seeking the voice—finally, an American. Perhaps I wouldn't feel too lonely in this place.

A dark-skinned man with a skinny frame and brown eyes walked in, a cigarette by the corner of his lips. He had a welcoming smile and was pointing at me.

"Is she the shawty you were talking about a few minutes ago? The smelly feet one?"

Atkinson nodded.

My jaw dropped, and I glared at him. He told them I had smelly feet?! I looked down at my legs. They seemed pretty standard and didn't smell. What the hell was wrong with Atkinson? If I were as strong as he was, I would be tossing him out of this aircraft.

"Pleasure to meet you, Miss." The man extended his hand to shake me. I observed Jane through my peripheral view. If her thoughts were printed on her forehead, one word would be there: murder. "I'm Harry, the pilot."

I inclined my head at him. He didn't necessarily act like a Harry or look like one. Perhaps I had been so Harry Potter-coded that anyone who didn't wear his usual round glasses wouldn't look like a Harry.

He chuckled and looked over his shoulder. "Hey, Arthur, you owe me fifty bucks! She actually doesn't believe it. She was expecting Tyrone or some Lamal shit."

"What are you two on about?" I asked.

"You were expecting a Harry Potter-looking brother, weren't you?" Harry smirked. "I know, I know, people like me don't necessarily answer Harry."

"I—"

"It's alright, girl. Thanks to you, Arthur here owes me fifty bucks. He believed that you'll actually think my name's Harry. I get that look a lot."

Arthur? Wait, Atkinson's real name is Arthur?

"Your name's Arthur? I thought it was Atkinson?"

Arthur shot Harry a glare.

"Shit, my bad. She doesn't know?" Harry's eyes widened.

"What do you think?"

"Well, we could just toss her outside the plane to protect your secret."

My eyes balled out. "Wait, what?!" *Are they insane?!*

"I'm kidding, relax." Harry grinned. "You should have seen your face." He covered his distance with Arthur, who held up fifty bucks with two fingers. "Nice doing business with you. Y'all should have a safe flight. I'm off to the cockpit."

What a human being. *He* was the pilot and told *us* to have a safe flight. Now, I had no choice but to be worried since, for the first time in my life, I was flown by a pilot who didn't make me feel comfortable. Arthur's crew were genuinely unusual.

***

One thing I would never have believed was where this plane would land. Since it was a military-grade aircraft, logically, it couldn't land in a regular or military airport because the agency in charge would be suspicious. In the few hours I had spent with them, I discovered that Harry was a registered pilot and had clearance to fly the plane.

How he managed to achieve that, I didn't know. All he claimed was that he had friends in high places. All they had wanted in return was that he used the plane to transport certain questionable items. I could already imagine the sort of things that would be transported.

"When are we landing?" I asked, looking out the cabin window.

Arthur sprang out of his seat and wore a backpack. "Now."

"What do you mean now? We're in the air."

"Exactly."

"Can you get her to shut up? I need to concentrate," Jane said, strapping onto her backpack.

"Why are we wearing backpacks?"

Arthur ignored my question and went to the wall where other backpacks hung. He unstrapped one and covered the distance between us. The closeness brought a particular dryness to my throat. He raised my hands and slipped the arms of a backpack through them, his fingers burning my skin as he grazed it.

"What's that?" I asked as he held onto my wrist and began leading me to the exit we had entered from.

A loud ping echoed through the room, and a chime came after. There was a buzz, and Jane sided with me, a severe look on her face with her eyes gazing at

the end of the room like it were her long-lost enemy in a war.

"Are you guys ready?" Harry's voice rang through the place.

"Affirmative," Arthur replied.

"Alright. Have a safe dive."

Dive?

I glanced up at Arthur. "Did he just say dive? Are we diving?"

"I thought it was rather obvious."

"No, it wasn't." The wall at the end began descending, revealing fluffy clouds and the bluish canvas of the sky. "Arthur, I'm not about to dive off a fucking plane with you."

The sky was in clear view now, a series of hard winds blowing my hair back. No, *no.* This was *ridiculous*. I wasn't jumping off this plane. I didn't even know what it entailed. My parents were dead; I wasn't ready to join them yet.

"Fuck no, Arthur. *Fuck no*."

He grabbed onto my wrist and forced me to him. There was a click, and I tried to move but was stuck. It was difficult to turn because it seemed he had connected our backpacks. What was up with this man?

Jane walked up to the edge and jumped off. I screamed. What was she doing? Did she want to die?

"Arthur, please, Arthur, *please*, I can—"

"My plane, my rules."

He jumped.

He fucking *jumped.*

My lungs exploded, my throat letting out the loudest cry ever. I wasn't about to die now. *Oh, hell no!* The wind ran past me, flapping curtains of my hair over my face. All I could see was blue, the excess force of air making my eyes watery.

"Arthur, if I die, I'm going to kill you!"

He chuckled, his laugh reverberating against my back. "I do not believe it is quite logical to do that."

"Arthur! I'm going to choke you to death!"

He chuckled once more.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Far more than you can imagine, Miss Michaelson."

I screamed. If I survived this, I would repent of all my sins.

Oh, so now you remember God?

I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply. This was madness. Why didn't I leave this man when I first saw him in that cafe? I quickly jumped at the opportunity because I believed having him by my side would be a win. Only criminals could understand criminals. Now, here I was, jumping off a fucking plane!

"I could knock you out like before if you desire so."

"Don't you dare!"

He laughed. The fact that he enjoyed my evident torture was even more traumatising to think of. What sort of human being enjoyed putting others through unimaginable pain?

Oh, I know.

Arthur.

The scary fall was still ongoing, but this time, I could see land. It was an extensive greenery surrounded by trees in a dense forest. A few cars were on the road some lengthy miles away from us. I doubted they would be able to see us.

A loud pop hissed, and a large canopy covered me from the harsh sun. Arthur must have released the parachute. Slowly, we glided downward until we arrived at the clearing where a black Rolls-Royce was parked. Jane took off her backpack and hopped into the driver's seat.

So, Arthur just happened to leave a Rolls-Royce lying out in the wild. How rich was this guy?

We landed, and I let out a sigh of relief. A click sounded, and I fell to the floor, grass stuffing my mouth. I had forgotten that I was connected to Arthur's backpack, so unfortunately, I had relied on his force of gravity instead of mine.

Hissing, I stood and spat out the leaves in my mouth. "What about my things?"

"Harry would bring everything."

"Where does he land that thing?"

"Knowing won't change anything," Arthur said, opening the car's rear door. "Hurry, let's go. We cannot afford to waste another second."

Exhaling, I entered the car, and Jane watched me through the rearview mirror with a disdainful glare before she started the engine and began driving.

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Chapter 12

OCTAVIA

The drive to wherever Jane was taking us was scary. Occasionally, she would glance at the back of the car, and a sharp glare would be sent my way. We kept passing apartments, and soon, panic spread through me. Could she perhaps be taking me to my slaughter?

Harry had mentioned earlier that they should toss me out of the plane since I knew Arthur's name. Perhaps this was an execution they had planned to take me out. I steered my gaze to Arthur. He sat with a calm demeanour shrouding his face, his gaze out the window.

If they had planned to kill me, he wouldn't be as relaxed as he was. But I saw how easily he killed all those people; surely, this would be a walk in the park for him. I gulped and drummed my feet monotonously on the floor. What would happen to me?

"We've been driving for a while; where are we headed ?" I asked.

Arthur glanced at me. "My apartment."

"I'm just saying, the drive looks a bit shady."

"If I wanted you dead, Ms. Michaelson, I would have left you at your apartment when I saw those men in black."

A thread of calmness snaked through my nerves. He had a point. However, it still bothered me how Jane drove through the night, temporarily glancing back at me as if she was monitoring my movements and waiting to make the right move. She couldn't be trusted, and I don't think she trusted me either.

She made a turn to a small gate by the right. Swiping a key card at the entrance, the gate slid open, and she drove in. It was a storage facility and had several locked units. She reached one, and automatically, it opened, allowing her to drive in.

Panic arose within me once more, my heart slamming against my chest. Why were we entering a storage unit? Was this the so-called apartment? I highly

doubted it. I sat upright, looking over my shoulder. The sound of my door opening brought me back to my surroundings. Arthur was standing at the door, holding it open for me.

He was an odd man. One second, he was being rude to me and calling me "Smelly Feet," and the next, he would be acting like a proper gentleman. It made it difficult to hate him altogether. At least he was being nice. I exited the car, and Jane brushed past me, hitting her shoulder against mine. It was hard, and I could tell her delts were aggressively developed. If I were to get into a fight with a girl like her, I would lose my teeth or even dislocate my jaw.

"Why are we in a storage facility?" I asked, glancing around to see if there was any impending danger.

"You truly ask a lot of questions, Ms. Michaelson."

"I mean, this is my first time in London. I need to understand where I am."

"My apartment is a four-minute walk from here."

I narrowed my eyes at Arthur as we walked out of the facility, Jane leading the way. "Then why did you park your Rolls Royce here?"

"For stealth."

"Stealth?"

"Something I believe you're not acquainted with."

My lips parted. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you were quite aware of your situation, you wouldn't have been living in the same apartment as you used to when you discovered McCarthy could be hiding a secret even the government would want to get their bloody hands on."

Damn it!

I hated the fact that he had a valid point. It was infuriating. Biting the inside of my cheeks, I tore my gaze away from him. I was already tense from what was happening and wouldn't want him to worsen my situation.

"Take the pavement," Arthur said, holding my hand and crossing the street with me. It flooded with red London tourist buses and some cabs with yellow signs atop them. I didn't like that he treated me like a child by holding my hand to cross the street. Perhaps he had believed he was only being courteous, but people like him couldn't be polite. People like him deserved jail time.

I snatched my hand from him as we crossed with his sister. We stepped on a sidewalk and continued walking, with him on the side of the road. The tall, glammy apartments with fancy, intricate Victorian gothic designs began disappearing, and what came next were shabby-looking apartments with their garbage bags filled to the brim.

Jane took a sharp turn and entered an apartment building. It didn't look like something I had expected Arthur to live in, considering he owned a Rolls-Royce and was ridiculously wealthy. The walls of the building had cracks, and geckos crawled all over. A rat ran into a hole by the corner. This was just the lobby.

In the corner, some men wearing ski masks were smoking a blunt. The smell of marijuana masked the air. The men pointed at me, and some whistled my way. Arthur placed a hand on the small of my back, and for the first time, I was glad for his presence.

We climbed the stairs. With each step I took, the wood cried for mercy. I glanced up at Arthur. For someone who made fun of my apartment, he seemed unusually comfortable staying in a place like this.

"You live here?" I asked.

"Occasionally, yes."

Jane stopped at a door in one of the corridors and opened it. The sweet scent of burning wood inside the apartment conquered the ashy hallway smell. From the foyer's view, I was stuck in a dilemma about the apartment. It was far different from the shit I had seen on my way here.

For starters, the room was designed with elaborate woodwork, and on the wall were coat hangers. The living room had brown settees and an ottoman chair beside a fireplace. A series of tall windows displayed the view of London—the infamous tower on the northwest bank of the Thames, the busy streets, and most importantly, the resting sun.

"I didn't..." I broke off, unable to finish my sentence, the beauty of the building sealing my mouth.

"Stealth, Ms. Michaelson," Arthur said, pouring himself a cup of whiskey. "You must learn the art of stealth to survive in my profession."

I sat on the ottoman chair, letting the warmth from the fireplace serenade my aching cold. "Theft, you mean."

"No," he said, handing me a cup of whiskey, and I took it. We chinked our cups together, "I take things from people who aren't smart enough to protect them. Two different things."

"That's what all thieves say."

He gulped his whiskey in one go and hissed, wincing. "Get up; let me show you to your room. You'll need some rest before I brief you on the plan."

"What plan?"

"You wanted to find out more about McCarthy. This plan will do just that."

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Chapter 13

ARTHUR

I've been losing sleep. Since I met Ms. Michaelson, I've not had any good shut-eye. Perhaps it was a sign she was going to destroy my life. Maybe she already was. However, the notion wasn't exactly exciting to entertain, considering she was a pest in my life, and I had suddenly entered a symbiotic relationship—she helped me get my money, and I would help her destroy whichever corrupt official she wanted to take down.

I drummed my fingers on the surface of my desk. Was this a good idea? I hadn't gotten the chance to speak with my sister, but I already knew it wouldn't be an exciting conversation. The lamp on the wall was pouring spills of golden light around my office. I watched it, my thoughts swirling in a fog that made it difficult to see a valid point to my decision.

The money was a winning factor, but it was to the detriment of my sister's happiness. She had occasionally begged for me to stop. Now, I had miraculously managed to bring a lady who had trouble with her.

My thoughts scattered in the warm air as the door creaked open. Jane walked in, wearing an oversized black T-shirt and loose grey sweatpants. She sat across from me, her eyes already telling tales of her displeasure with my decision.

"Hello, Sister," I said as I stood and picked up a whiskey bourbon from a mini bar hanging on the wall. Settling it between us, I poured for her and then for myself in crystal glass cups. "Please, help yourself."

Her jaw muscles flexed, and she picked hers up. No matter how vexed my sister was, she could never say no to a well-made Irish whiskey. Gulping it down in one go, my eyes widened at her bravery. She hissed and wiped her mouth clean.

"I'm guessing you're here for more than just whiskey."

"You read me quite clearly."

"Indeed," I said, reclining in my seat and crossing one leg over the other.

"That American twat."

"I know, I know," I said, raising a hand to show agreement.

"What did we agree to?"

I settled my glass down and wet my lower lips. "We didn't exactly agree."

"This girl, she's trouble—more trouble than we could afford. We're involved with the government. We've never tampered with the government."

"Yes, we've not. But this lady, she has the Holy Grail."

Jane raised a brow. "Holy Grail?"

"Don't you see, Jane? This is my chance." I learned forward and suggestively pointed a finger at the desk. "This is the opportunity I've been seeking. After this heist, we'll have so much money that we will never have to steal again."

"That is what you say every time. Don't you see, this *thing* is like a parasite feeding on you, making it difficult for you to see what truly matters: us. We have each other; that will always be enough."

Her words streamed through my blood, straight to my heart and rendered it limp. No words were more accurate than what she uttered. But I couldn't allow myself to feel secure. Feeling safe in the hands of my Uncle when our parents died was what ended us in this situation in the first place. I would never feel secure until I had given Jane the world. I would never feel safe until I was sure there would be no man in the world foolish enough to dare spit on her like that foolish man did years ago. Money was power, and it would always be power.

"I understand you, sister. I truly do," I explained. "However, this is a chance that only comes once. We cannot afford to lose it . Surely, you do understand. This would be the last time. I promise."

Her eyes were getting wet, and she threw her gaze to the floor, a teardrop falling to the ground. "I just don't want you to get hurt. You're all I have."

Please don't cry.

My tears were coming, but I closed my eyes and held them back. Jane needed to understand I was doing this for her. As her brother, my duty was to protect her, and more money would make that easier.

"I swear, Jane." I held her hands. "On our parents' grave, I swear to stop after all this. But I cannot do it without your help."

She sniffed, and I handed her a handkerchief. Wiping her eyes clean, she looked up at me and blew into the cloth.

"Promise?" she asked.

I raised my pinky, and we locked fingers. "I promise."

***

An invisible weight pulled my eyelids. I was in a much-needed situation for a rest. I had just explained the plan to penetrate McCarthy's defence during the massive party he would be throwing. It was simple: we would sneak in, and I would slip into his office to search for anything useful. Easy peasy. Hopefully, Ms. Michaelson wouldn't do anything to interrupt my brilliant plan.

Just as I was about to enter the dream realm at this late hour, an annoying scream pierced through the apartment. Shirtless, I shot out of bed and grabbed my pistol from under my pillow. I slinked down the corridor, and Jane poked her head through her door.

"What's it?" she asked, her eyelids swollen from sleep.

"I heard a scream."

Harry walked out of his room, rubbing his eyes. "Bro, what's going on?"

"A scream."

"Oh, not this shit again. I was just about to sleep. Can't we ever get a good night's sleep in our profession?"

"I'm afraid not, Harry."

The trickling sound of water filled the air, and I wondered what was the matter. Following the sound, I soon found myself moving towards Ms. Michaelson's room. A foamy stream of water ran down the wooden floor, making it difficult to understand the connection between this water and the scream I had heard.

Gently pushing her door wide open, I spotted her wearing a white towel around her breasts, and her room was filled with water. My throat tightened at the sight of her wet skin, and I had to snap myself out of my stupid fantasies. I couldn't afford to have foolish thoughts about her.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

She inhaled. "I spoilt the showerhead."

"And that's why you screamed?"

"Fuck this, I'm out," Jane said and left with a hiss, and Harry followed her.

Great, now I was left alone with Octavia Michaelson, the cunning vixen. I looked up at the wall clock; it was two in the morning. If I didn't get enough rest, I wouldn't be able to make it to McCarthy's party in one piece. Rolling my grey sweatpants to my knees, I walked over the mess Ms. Michaelson had caused. At this rate, it would be difficult to convince my sister that she could at least handle the American's presence. I needed to achieve that if I wanted team harmony.

Entering her bathroom was like entering a mini version of the Thames River. Everywhere was so damn flooded that I didn't know where to start. I picked up the broken showerhead and fixed it. It was easier than I had expected.

"Arthur, I'm so sorry," Ms. Michaelson said, rising from her bed and closing our distance.

"It's not your fault. Apparently, my appliances are quite advanced for you."

Her jaw dropped. "Now that's not fair."

"You know what's not fair?" I closed the distance between us, her breath hitching as I leaned closer to her face. "You choosing me in the first place to be your accomplice in all this. Now I have no choice but to do so because there's lots of quid involved. You're a temptress, Ms. Michaelson, and unfortunately, I'm already drawn to your venomous claws. So whatever this assumption you have is, it had better be true, for both our sakes."

She searched my eyes, her gaze softening. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"I never said so." I clicked my tongue against my teeth and backed away. "Assumptions are dangerous. That's all."

"Fine."

"Good. Do you have a dress for tomorrow?"

She nodded and walked to her wardrobe, and withdrew a basic plain white gown. Now, this was quite silly. I was Arthur Knight, and I couldn't let any lady standing next to me dress like she had bought clothes from a second-hand store.

"No way in the Queen's name will you be wearing that."

Her face was masked with worry as she looked over the dress. "What's wrong with it?"

"Everything," I replied. "Get some sleep. First thing tomorrow morning, we're going shopping. Perhaps while I'm at it, I could use the opportunity to teach you how to dress like a lady befitting of my station."

"You're so cocky, it's infuriating."

"I'm not. I'm taking you shopping with an unlimited budget." I smirked. "Most ladies would call me the perfect gentleman. Now go to bed; we have a long day ahead of us."

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Chapter 14

ARTHUR

The last woman I ever went shopping with was my sister. Before that, it was my mother before she passed away. She had always been fond of dressing herself in the newest dresses, and more importantly, they were always elegant. Jane, my dear sister, on the other hand, despised being dressed like what the Americans would call a Barbie doll.

Now, this information was important because I had been so accustomed with my sister's quick shopping that I had forgotten how long it took women to pick the perfect dress. Ms. Michaelson was putting me through the same torture.

I rested my finger on the bridge of my nose and observed the room again. Gowns hung on hangers, and mannequins displayed the latest editions from the trendiest fashion lines. The only thing comforting about this place was the rosy scent running through the air and warm LED lights.

Occasionally, a woman or a group of women would walk by, smiling at me as they giggled and continued down the room. I was well aware of my British charms, but being with a woman as simple as Ms. Michaelson seemed to sap me of all my brimming confidence. She made life occasionally worse, and the only reason I kept tolerating her was the opportunity she had presented to me. Only a fool would pass by such an opportunity and call himself smart.

Finally, after what felt like eons, the wardrobe door slid open, and she walked out. My eyes widened. Octavia Michaelson had managed, by some sort of American miracle, to look beautiful. Her brown hair, falling in wavy curls, complemented the golden gown she wore that fell on the floor like a waterfall of gold. She twirled around, arms wide, and my mouth went dry.

Bloody hell. She made that ten-thousand-pounds dress look more expensive than it was.

"What do you think?"

I cleared my throat and pursed my lips. If I said something too flattering, her ego would be way too inflated for me to bring down, and if I lied, well, that would be silly of me. For if a lady looked gorgeous, it was only customary for me to tell her so if she sought my opinion.

"You look—"

"Bad?"

"No, more like—"

"Horrendous? I knew I shouldn't have picked—"

I rolled my eyes. "Please, Ms. Michaelson, let me talk. I believe it's not going to be a difficult task for your porous brain to handle."

"Fine."

"Great." I anchored my arm, and she snaked hers through it. "You look wonderful."

Her eyes lit up as she looked up at me. "Really?"

"Well, I've got fabulous taste, so it's more of a *me* situation than a *you* situation."

"You never fail to make it about you, do you?"

I could sense the disappointment in her voice. The truth was, that despite my most vigorous attempts to paint her like a menace in my mind, she still managed to tear through those curtains and let me see the light she truly radiated. But would I tell her that?

Bloody.

Hell.

No.

Emphasis on the *no*.

"Let's hurry up; Jane is already at the location."

We reached the exit, and Ms. Michaelson tugged at my arm. I paused and stared down, wondering why she kept delaying our schedule.

"We've not paid yet."

"We don't need to."

She looked back at me, her eyes widening. "Don't tell me this is one of your stealing escapades. I will not be a part of this."

The revelation I was about to give her would be worth it, as I couldn't wait to see her reaction. Smirking, I tugged at her arm and started walking out. She wriggled, struggling to get away from my grip.

"Arthur, I won't stand for this. It's not—"

I smirked. "Relax, Ms. Michaelson. I own the store."

The look on her face was like when a child was told they would not have their toys for the next ten years of their developing life. I laughed out, placing my hand on my stomach. It had been a while since I enjoyed someone's company this much.

The only dangerous thing about this was that I knew where these situations lead. In my profession, there was no room for emotional involvement, especially when you've lost a lover because of it.

***

I settled into the back of the SUV and placed in an earpiece. Lifting my laptop, I began typing. A buzz rang through, and I held the earpiece.

"Jane, do you read me?"

Buzz.

"Jane?"

Buzz.

"Keep your bloody voice down," she replied with a groan. "Why do I have to be the waitress?"

"Considering you don't like gowns, I thought a role that required wearing a trouser would be more than adequate."

"Ever the gentleman, Arthur."

"My pleasure, Sister."

Leaning over, I placed an earpiece in Ms. Michaelson's ear. While adjusting it to fit properly, she shifted her gaze to my lips, watching me with her dark eyes, which seemed to pull me into a trance. My throat tightened, and I gulped, holding myself back. Blast her for staring at me in such a manner that was simply innocent but heated enough to make me think without a brain.

"Can you hear?" I asked, our cheeks inches apart, her breath fanning my neck.

She nodded.

"Good."

"We're closing in," Harry said, steering with a hand to the left. Just like me, he was dressed in a well-tailored suit, but unlike me, who was dressed in all black as always, he wore a white shirt with a black suit jacket and trousers.

I handed Ms. Michaelson a tablet. "That's a tracker. Your job is to tell me when a red light starts blinking."

The SUV stopped, and I stepped out, holding onto the lapels of my suit jacket. Opening the door for her, I extended my hand, and she took it. Her palms felt softer than usual today. The feeling was like a hard rock tossed into a soft dough.

McCarthy's mansion was massive. It was Moroccan-themed, with flat rooftops, fencing parapets, and Arabesque designs on the walls. Ladies wearing satin sheets around their waists danced with their hips, silk ribbons twirling in the air. It was hypnotic, and I had to blink twice to ensure I wouldn't fall for any mind games. There was also the possibility that I was merely paranoid.

"Wow," Ms. Michaelson said, holding me close, her woody rosemary scent overwhelming my senses. Fuck, she smelled good.

"Well, one thing's sure, McCarthy has got good taste." I tapped my earpiece. "Jane, what's your position?"

A buzz came. "Six o'clock, yellow cocktail, and an uncomfortable uniform."

Smirking, I scanned and quickly spotted her. She truly detested her outfit. Every two seconds, she adjusted the bow tie she wore, her forehead lines crumpling as she did so. Oddly, the stewardesses in McCarthy's household were still mandated to wear bow ties with a full-on white shirt and high-waisted trousers.

"You look marvellous."

"Shut up, Arthur."

"You'll be our eyes on the outside once we enter the office."

She nodded and served a drink. I led Ms. Michaelson through the crowd of opulent individuals. Each one of them had pockets so deep I could drown in and never want to leave. Their smiles, their laughter —everything seemed fake. Rich people weren't this happy. They all had something fucked up about them. Take

Ms. Hannah, for example; She made me scream animal noises while she touched herself.

"Mathew!"

That bloody voice. It seemed Lady Luck had shone on me quite early today. Spinning on my Oxford's, I faced the lady who had managed to make French men of the 1800s seem saintly. Dear Ms. Hannah walked towards me with a smile, sporting a sleeveless black gown that was way too revealing for her large breasts. Did she want them to spill out of her dress? If those were her intentions, she was doing a wonderful job.

"Mathew! I didn't know I would see you here."

Ms. Michaelson wanted to speak, but I pinched under her arm. Standing like a rod was shot up my ass, I cleared my throat and smiled so hard my face kept begging me to stop.

"Ms. Hannah, you look more beautiful than ever."

"Oh, please, you flatter me," she said and hugged me. Her gaze darkened when she saw Ms. Michaelson. *Ah, the jealousy.* "Who's this?"

"This is Amarae, the leader of my charity foundation, the one you promised to deposit one hundred million dollars into."

"Mathew, always business first with you," she said and held onto my arms, leading me away from Ms. Michaelson. "Come with me; we have more important matters to attend to."

As she pulled me further from Smelly Feet, I could see the shock in her eyes grow with each second. Well, I couldn't believe it either. When a client needed to be serviced, I beckoned to their call.

Ms. Hannah forced her way through the crowd like a woman on a mission. Soon, we were moving through hallways, and with each step we took, the sounds of conversation began to fade. Pushing open a door, she dragged me to a dark corner. It was a dimly lit library with soft lamps on each aisle of bookshelves.

"Oh, Mathew, I've fucking missed you," she said, pulling down my trousers and grabbing me, stroking harder than usual.

Stupidly, I was aroused. What was wrong with me? A woman was yanking my joystick like it was a car gear shift, and all I could do was think about sticking it inside her. But I had to hold myself. I hadn't fucked any lady since the death of

my ex. It was kind of my way of keeping them at bay because if I fucked them, they would become obsessed, and that obsession would lead to their death.

Ms. Hannah's breath was hot as she kissed me, her lips burning with persistence. The roams of her finger were a torture to my skin, leaving scarring trails of pleasure everywhere she visited.

"Hannah, I don't think we should be doing this."

She let down her sleeves, her breast swelling with each heavy breath she made. Leading my hands to her soft mounds, she bit my lip, the taste of metal flooding my mouth.

"Don't talk, just bark while you fuck me."

Jesus.

I grew soft. She just had to ruin it. As if calling the Lord's name was powerful enough, the door opened, spilling beams of golden light from the hallway. Quickly, I put on my trousers, and Ms. Hannah adjusted her clothes and hair.

Ms. Michaelson appeared as her footsteps grew louder. Permit me to say that I saw a glare in her eyes as she looked at Ms. Hannah. Briskly advancing, she grabbed my hand.

"The host is about to make an announcement, Mr. Mathew. We have to leave."

I kissed Ms. Hannah on the cheeks, and Ms. Michaelson's nails dug deep into my skin. What was wrong with her?!

"We have to leave now."

"I'll see you later, Ms. Hannah."

She winked. "I'm sure you will, Mathew."

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Chapter 15

OCTAVIA

I grabbed Arthur's hand and stormed out of the room. Threads of rage roped through my veins, boiling my body to a temperature so hot it was enough to boil water. Only one thing confused me: my anger. Why was I angry when that lady, stupid Ms. Hannah, took Arthur? And why did I get more aggravated when I caught both of them in the library, doing God knows what?

Deep down, I didn't want to find out. I inhaled sharply and stopped once we reached the main room where all the guests were. People were being served drinks, and a stewardess approached me with two glasses of champagne.

"Care for some, Miss?"

Without hesitating, I gulped down one glass after the other. The stewardess's eyes balled, and she gulped, fear rippling in the surface of her eye. Well, shit. I needed to quench my thirst because thinking about how Arthur was foolishly mingling with a woman instead of focusing on the mission made my mouth dry.

"Goodness, Ms. Michaelson," Arthur said, siding with me. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't sound quite so."

"I said, *yes*, Arthur. What more do you want me to say?"

His jaw muscles flexed, and he looked away. My heart tore at the gesture. I was rude. Despite him pissing me off every second he got, he was a nice person. No one would be that quick to save somebody they didn't know if they didn't have a heart. And even if he would use the guise of wanting the money, it still took a kind person to take such a step.

"Arthur, I'm sorry."

He took a cup of champagne and gulped it down, settling it back on the tray. "You don't have to worry yourself, Ms. Michaelson. Your words have little to no effect on me."

I balled my fists. Did I sincerely believe a man like him could change? He was so full of himself. I couldn't wait to get this over with so I wouldn't have to see his stupid face ever again.

A round of applause erupted in the room, and McCarthy climbed up the stage dressed in a white suit, an annoying smile on his face. He still looked the same, with his ginger hair and freckles on his cheeks.

"Thank you, thank you," he said, grinning. With such a genuine smile, you would never believe a man like him could be involved in anything dark. But one thing doing the job of a reporter had taught me over the years was that I should never judge anyone by their appearance.

"We have to leave now," Arthur said, moving away from the crowd. "Jane, cover our six. Keep your eyes on McCarthy."

My earpiece buzzed, and she replied, "Affirmative."

Holding onto the tablet Arthur gave me, I followed him. My gown swept the floor, creating friction between me and my movements. We entered a hallway with large white pillars lining the right side, and holding up a balcony above.

Men in black suits roamed the area, and I noticed them giving me occasional glances. My stomach pooled with bile, and I began to reconsider this mission. As we ventured further, the voice of McCarthy began drowning, becoming a distant echo of its former self.

A golden-coloured door loomed ahead, guarded by two men who kept moving in rotation. But most of the time, they were barely leaving the door. Arthur turned to me, and there was a smirk on his face. I didn't like that look.

"I've got a plan."

"Whatever it is, no."

"Well, you ought to listen to me. It's the only way in."

Exhaling, I asked him to explain it to me, and he did. Just like I suspected, it was going to be a horrible one. I wouldn't say I liked it. It involved acting in a certain way that I wouldn't call decent.

He handed me a plastic stick that had a camera at the back.

"What's this?"

"A flash stick." He smirked. "A little invention of mine. One flash at the men with this, and they're in sleep territory."

Handing him the tablet, I huffed and adjusted my brassiere, raising my breasts higher. This was disgusting. Absolutely disgusting. Doing this fucking nonsense just to get those men to stare.

"What if they don't stare?"

Arthur tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, sending shivers down my spine. He didn't have the right to touch me without a warning. That reaction was simply because he did it unexpectedly, nothing more. I felt nothing for this man.

"I'm always right, Ms. Michaelson, now go."

"Don't command me."

"Bloody hell, I'm not. Just go."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Say it more kindly."

He held the bridge of his nose. "Alright, please move your silly American arse before we get caught."

I hated how right he was. His kinder version of words was worse than the previous one. Readying myself with a deep breath, I advanced to the men, chest out. I rarely walked like this, so my back kept praying I didn't snap it into two. A few meters close to them, they already observed my presence.

"Miss, you're not supposed to be here."

"Oh my, really? Help me, I'm so lost," I said in the most helpless voice ever.

The eyes of the men brightened, and they approached me, settling their guard down, their hands away from the gun in their suit jacket.

"Miss, the hallway is down—"

Flash!

"Ah, fuck!"

Arthur appeared, hitting both men in their necks and sending them to sleep. Was this what he did to me back then when I couldn't handle the intruders? If so, he was a very vile human being.

My breath quickened. "I thought you said the device would put them to sleep."

"Not quite so," he said, taking the flash from me and bending down to search the men. He picked up a key from one of the men's pockets. "It was only a catalyst."

"Nothing about you is ever true."

He raised a brow and lifted the two men, resting them on his shoulder. They were slightly shorter than him, but surprisingly, he could still carry them both. He dumped them in a storage room by the corner and closed the door.

"Alpha to six, do you read me?"

I glanced around. That didn't come from my earpiece. Just then, I spotted a walkie-talkie on the ground. Stamps of fear repeatedly hit my heart, making it feel like it was exploding every second. We had screwed up.

Arthur placed a finger on his lips and picked up the walkie-talkie before saying, "Six to alpha, we copy. Six are moving to the entrance for weapon check, requesting cover."

The talkie buzzed.

"Cover confirmed."

"Thank you."

He cut off the walkie-talkie and tossed it inside the storage room. In the blink of an eye, he was trying out the key he took from the guard on the door, and with a click, the door opened. He held it open for me.

"How did you do that?" I asked, entering the room, and he shut the door behind me.

"I'm a genius, Ms. Michaelson; get used to it."

I rolled my eyes. The office was like what you would expect from one. A bookshelf stood to the right, a black desk, and an executive dark chair at the end. A soft breeze entered the room, causing the golden curtains to gently sway back and forth.

"What are we looking for?" I asked.

"Anything that could tell us what is going on here."

The redundant scent of a peachy perfume was growing. If there was one thing I could say about McCarthy, it was that he had an excellent taste in perfume. I scanned the area—files on the desk, a flower pot in the corner, and soon, I went over to the bookshelf. I ran my hands over the spines of the books, feeling the textured dust on my fingertips.

In my line of sight, a book without any dust caught my eye. The wooden floor it rested on was not dusty, unlike the rest of the bookshelf, suggesting it

was frequently used. Retrieving the book from the bookshelf, I opened it, and a folded piece of paper fell out.

Arthur picked it up. "What is this?"

"I don't know. I just found it here."

He opened the paper and spread it open on the desk. I joined in the scrutiny. There were many zeros on this sheet. *Carthy Press? Two hundred Million?*

"Why does this reason for the transaction say consultation services?" Arthur asked, pointing at the figures. "Doesn't your company have consultants?"

"We do, but this is unusual. Our consultants work in the company, so there is no need to send money out like this. And by the way, the gross salary per annum for our consultants should be at most five million dollars."

"Yes, it's quite odd."

The door knob creaked.

Fuck.

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Chapter 16

ARTHUR

For the first time since I started this business, things had gone south on a mission. Was Ms. Michaelson some sort of bad luck? Ever since we met, I had always been caught unprepared. Snatching the paper and sliding it up my sleeves, I pulled her to a side, my heart ramming against my chest like an aggressive emo drummer playing in a concert after his emo girlfriend had broken his heart.

"Take it easy," she said. I placed a hand over her mouth and pulled her toward a drawn curtain.

It was long enough to conceal our legs. I smiled; at least one thing was going my way today. Ms. Michaelson's bloody ass melted between my hips, and I inhaled sharply. What sort of sorcery was this? With careful composure, I moved my hips to the side, which worsened the matter.

"I can feel your dick."

"And I can feel your bloody ass," I whispered, my cheeks burning.

I wasn't proud of myself. Now, she would have a reason to make fun of me whenever she wished. The rattling of keys disturbed the silence of the room. Footsteps echoed—one had a dull tone to it, while the other was high-pitched. From my experience, dull tones signified shoes with flat soles or low heels. I would guess that it was an Oxford. The other tone resulted from a high-heeled shoe.

A woman and man were in the room.

I was expecting a bunch of henchmen. My breathing normalised.

"Well, what are we going to do?"

Hannah?

That was Ms. Hannah's voice! Could I be mistaken? I had spent enough time on the phone with that woman not to recognise her voice anywhere. Shivers ran through my body, memories of our disturbing calls clogging my head.

"So what are we to do? Knight doesn't seem to think it's a good idea to continue this pattern."

Knight? That was my surname. It would be foolish to assume I was the only one who bore the name. It could very well be someone else. The closeness with Ms. Michaelson was growing quite troublesome. Her thighs melted around my arousal, and I gulped, sweat trickling down the side of my head.

Deep breaths, Arthur.

Think of something disgusting.

Something like maggots.

Maggots? What the bloody hell was wrong with my brain? At least my hardness was shrinking. My thoughts weren't ethical, but the result was effective.

"We have to stick to our normal transmission mode," the female said.

"What if we—"

Ms. Michaelson sneezed.

She *sneezed.*

She *fucking* sneezed!

My joints froze, and so did the conversation. Footsteps closed in, and the curtain was ripped open. I held my breath, Ms. Hannah standing before me.

"Mathew."

"Ms. Hannah."

"I was right; we did meet again."

"Quite so."

She wet her lower lips and took a step back to side with McCarthy. "How much of that did you hear?"

"That shouldn't be the question you should be asking. I would like to know how..." McCarthy went dumb when he spotted Ms. Michaelson. "*You.*"

She inched closer to me, and I let her anchor her hand through my elbow. Even if she was the reason we got caught, I was still obligated to protect her. I had brought her here, and if anyone touched her, they would die.

"You know her?" Ms. Hannah asked.

McCarthy nodded. "She's the one I told you about. The nosy reporter."

"And you, Mathew," Ms. Hannah said, smirking, "must be the gentleman who saved her."

I shrugged. This wasn't how the night was meant to go. McCarthy had a pen in his hand with a red button at its end. He pressed it gently, and I flexed my jaw. He had hit his panic button.

My earpiece buzzed. *"Arthur, I'm coming to the window. Prepare to jump."*

Always on time, sister.

I slowly stepped back, leading Ms. Michaelson with me. Ms. Hannah raised a brow and placed her hands on her hips. She must be foolish if she thought I wasn't brave enough to jump out the window.

"Is Mathew really your name?" she asked.

I smirked. "It is."

"Do you truly own a charity organisation?"

"I do."

"Don't lie to me." Her eyes had a mischievous sheen running past it. "You won't leave here alive."

"Famous last words, Ms. Hannah."

I rounded Ms. Michaeslon and draped my arm around her, my chest grazing her shoulder. Her breath hitched, and she looked up at me through her lashes, an unusual emotion consuming her eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"Saving your American ass."

I jumped off, my back to the ground to protect Ms. Michaelson. She screamed as usual, her voice tearing through the air. I landed on the roof of my car, tears blurring my eyes.

That hurt.

Ms. Michaelson slipped out of my hold and held my face. "Fuck, are you alive?"

"This isn't my first rodeo, Ms. Michaelson," I coughed, rolling off the car and landing with a thud into a hedge. Getting up, I dusted the leaves off my body and opened the door for a still-perplexed Ms. Michaelson. "Get in."

She did so without hesitation, and for the first time, my body was riddled with a torrent of shock. Perhaps she was smart enough not to say anything stupid at a time like this. Hopping inside, I tapped the headrest of the driver's seat, and Harry hit the gear.

"I'm guessing you all heard everything," I said, pulling out my pistol.

The tyres of the car screeched as Harry took a sharp turn in the driveway and said, "How the hell is Ms. Hannah part of this crazy shit? I thought she was only crazy in the sex department."

"Well, devil if I know."

My sister was quiet. That only meant trouble. Ms. Michaelson gazed at the car floor, her hands drumming on her knees. She had to be brimming with guilt. I could feel the energies between both women clash: accusation versus guilt.

"Arthur, we've got company," Jane said, loading her assault rifle with her mag and dipping her upper body past the car window.

Harry charged dangerously at the barrel of men in suits holding a gun at the gate. From the corner of my eyes, I spotted a familiar frame—dark hair, black eyes, a golden ring with a crest I knew all too well. My eyes widened, and before I could register whether I was dreaming, a cacophony of thuds parried the car's windows.

They're shooting at us!

I cocked my gun. "Ms. Michaelson, get down."

She did as I asked. *Again*. Was the world coming to an end? Since when did she listen without asking any bloody questions?

"I have a question, Jane." I opened the moon roof and aimed at the SUVs charging at us. "How on earth did you miss McCarthy coming to the office?"

"He went out of my field of vision." She hissed and fired at the SUVs as well. "Don't blame me. Blame the dumb American who couldn't help but sneeze on an important mission."

For some reason, I felt a surge of anger. Why? I shouldn't care if my sister always seemed to find a reason to be rude to Ms. Michaelson. Something must be wrong with me. Truly.

Bullets scraped past the roof, leaving dents. *My Cadillac*! I didn't have a stronger urge to kill these fools than now. I stuck a hand in my back pocket and handed Ms. Michaelson an unhooked grenade.

"Why are you giving me a grenade?!" she asked, her eyes widening with horror.

"Toss it outside."

"What?"

"Toss it outside, or we'll become the devil's dinner!" I yelled, lifting my upper body past the moon roof again.

"Okay, okay! Jesus!"

The grenade clanked as it landed. In seconds, the SUVs behind us erupted in flames, a dome of yellowish-white smoke entering the dark sky. Soon, we were in the streets, Harry driving like a madman, weaving past lanes of cars.

I entered the car once again and rested my head on the headrest. Ms. Michealson's heavy breathing sliced through the air occasionally. Yes, she'd just blown up people to bits, but that wasn't enough for her to breathe like she had an encounter with the angel of death.

"I blew up those people, " she said, her eyes about to pop out of her sockets.

"It's kill or be killed, Ms. Michaelson. When will you get it into your skull that McCarthy doesn't want you alive?"

Considering she was American, I would say it would take quite some time.

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Chapter 17

OCTAVIA

"Take a seat," Arthur said, shutting his office door.

His deep voice sent thrills down my spine. I didn't know if I was excited or scared that I was about to be scolded. It was my fault we lost the mission. Throughout the car chase, all I could think about was how I had messed everything up.

I clenched my fist. It wasn't encouraging in the least. Here I was, trying to make Arthur believe that I was helpful, that I wasn't a burden—and then I ruined it with a fucking *sneeze*. It was his fault for using such a strong perfume.

It was everywhere in the room, flooding my nostrils. I hadn't been in his office before. There were bookshelves in one corner, and at another end was what seemed to be a work table with tools and some electrical wiring around incomplete electronics.

"I make inventions occasionally," Arthur said, handing me a glass of champagne.

I hesitated to take it. I had ruined the mission, and he acted like we had won. Nothing about this night was going my way. I had killed some people by blowing them to bits. Yet, in a scary turn of events, I didn't even feel guilty. What was happening to me? What was he turning me into?

"Did you spike this?" I asked, finally taking the glass from him.

"If I wanted you dead, Ms. Michealson, you would never have met my family."

My family.

Meeting his family wasn't as big a deal as he made it appear. I mean, this man killed people. He did it like it was a sport. He was a thief as well. Both combos were deadly for my existence.

"Have a seat," he said again, going behind his desk.

I sat, the hairs of my body standing erect. The uncertainty of what the night held tied me with a rope of thorns. I gulped the champagne in one go and noticed his eyebrow raise in surprise. After what happened this night, I deserved a good ass drink. I could even take on the whole champagne bottle if his stupid British ass would let me.

Arthur sipped from his glass. "You brought this gig to me, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did." I didn't enjoy the degrading tone of his voice.

"And it took a lot of convincing to get me to do it, wouldn't you agree?"

"I wouldn't exactly say it took a lot of convincing."

His blue gaze ran over my upper body, almost as if he were having silly thoughts at such an inappropriate time. Maybe I was seeing things. His gaze hardened, and he leaned forward, pointing outside the door.

"Out there, my sister won't have any qualms with putting a bullet through your head. She doesn't trust you and has good reason not to. You sabotaged the mission. It's almost like you wanted us to get caught."

Now, that was foul. A heat wave blasted through my head, and the blood in my veins boiled. If there was anyone here who should be judged for seeming untrustworthy, it should be them: the family of thieves.

"I do not wish to continue this conversation."

"You're not leaving this room, Ms. Michaelson, till we find out what's wrong with your brain."

His commanding tone tossed my mind in a torrent of emotions. On one end of the spectrum, I was angry that he thought he could control me, and on the other end, a stupid thrill ran like hairy spiders over my skin. However, I wouldn't let my pride be trampled upon like that. So I stood and advanced to the door.

Holding the doorknob, a veiny hand came over my shoulder and shut the door. Arthur's eyes were brimming with a dangerous haze. I had never seen him this serious before. My spine straightened, and I could feel a smile slowly trying to appear behind my lips, but I suppressed it. His anger made me happy, and I had no fucking idea why.

"Sit down. *Now.*"

"You don't own me, Arthur."

"I never *planned* on owning such a bloody headache."

"It's good to know I live rent-free in your fucking head."

"Don't tempt me, Ms. Michaealson."

I smirked, moving close to him, a nervous tick at the back of my head. Our closeness was making my heart clench and my vision blurry.

"What would you do?"

His breathing became ragged, his gaze travelling from my eyes to my lips. My eyes widened, and tingles played at my fingertips. What was this feeling? Before my thoughts could be processed, I felt his rough fingers comb through my hair and pull me in for the hottest kiss I ever had.

It was mind-numbing, dragging every inch of my breath, soul, lust and passion. I was drowning in his determination and let myself be consumed by his fire, inching closer to him, wanting more than a kiss. I hated this feeling. Why was I wanting more of him? This was a man who killed people, stole fortunes, and ruined lives.

I was kissing him.

I pulled back, strings of saliva connecting our lips. His breathing was heavy, his eyes reddening with true passion and lust. Jesus, he fucking wanted me. And in that moment, my stupid body was pleading for him. My nipples were hardened, the hem of the gown I wore tugging hard at them.

I sent a slap his way, feeling my shoulders weaken. Why did I do that?! Maybe I wanted to punish him for putting my body through such an experience. It didn't have to be good, but it was.

He ran his hand gently over his cheek and stepped towards me. His steps were primal, like a lion stalking its prey. My breath caught, and I gulped. I was in trouble. The thought of what he would do to me now made my knees knock and plead for mercy. I stepped back, almost tripping over his desk.

"Do you hate how I make you feel, Ms. Michaelson?"

"I hate *you*."

"That's the boldest lie I've ever heard."

"It's the truth."

He smirked and closed the distance between us. What would he do next? Would he touch me? Would he kiss me? The anticipation was burning my flesh.

The devil would be fucking jealous of my skin right now. Lost in my thoughts, he took me by surprise, wrapping his veiny hands around my neck.

"Do you still hate me now?"

"Y-yes."

His fingers dug deeper into my skin. It was hard but gentle enough not to choke me. Threads of excitement snaked through me, my core warming up. Shit, this was dangerous. If I spent another second with this man, we could end up doing something foolish.

"That doesn't sound very confident."

"I fucking *hate* you. "

He leaned over my shoulder and whispered, "Saying it twice doesn't make a difference."

His soft but sharp stubble grazed my neck, eliciting a spark of excitement through my veins.

"You're not acting very gentlemanly right now."

"Oh, Ms. Michaelson," he drawled, biting gently on my ear lobe. "The things my mind craves to do to you are far from gentlemanly."

He was between me now, my legs open to accept him. This was madness. There was no way I was about to be fucked right now by a man whom I had never believed had this wild side to him. Arthur was making my body and mind go on a third world war.

"Do your worst," I dared.

"I didn't hear you, Ms. Michaelson."

"I said do yo—"

He forced my hips closer, biting softly into the skin of my neck. I ran my hands through his hair, cursing myself for indulging in this foolishness. What was I doing? My legs curled around his hips, bringing him closer with the heels of my feet. Between my thighs pulsed, almost as if my pussy had a heartbeat of its own.

He raised my gown, the folds bunching around my hips, my bare skin exposed to the cold air. His hardness slammed against me, and I grabbed the sides of the desk for support. *Shit*. It felt like a thick, fleshy barrel slid up and down my wetness, making me want to be filled instantly. The sway of his hips as

we dry-humped made my whole body feel like a big ball of crazy nerve endings, every single touch of his fingers setting my body ablaze.

I never knew dry humping could be paradise. His hip thrusts were sending pistoning bursts of euphoria up my stomach, my thighs a wet mess. He stopped devouring my neck and took his fiery campaign to my chest, his hands tearing my dress, letting my breasts fall out.

He sucked like his life depended on it, a striking force of electricity coursing up my chest and slamming my vision with blinding white lights. Was this heaven?

"Arthur, " I gasped and made a small whine.

This was going too far. I ached. I ached so fucking bad to be touched between my legs. The bulge of his erection against my lower stomach made me wonder how it'd feel to have him buried within me. This was a conflict between my dirtiest desires and my sane mind.

While I got closer to heaven's gates with the curve of his cock, the most unexpected thing happened. He took a step back and grinned.

He stopped.

He *fucking* stopped.

"Get out of my office," he said, a devilish glint in his eyes.

My blood ran cold, and a strong torrent of heat conquered my cheeks. What was the meaning of this? My heart clenched hard. This had to be the most embarrassing moment of my life. I looked down, wishing the ground would open and swallow not only me but also the memories of what just happened.

I opened my mouth, but the words just hung there. What did I want to say? Did I want to ask him why he stopped passionately devouring my body? Did I genuinely want to stoop that low? Exhaling, I pivoted and headed to the door, feeling his gaze drill aching holes in my back. I adjusted my dress, hoping I concealed my breasts properly.

If I needed another reason to hate him, I had just found one. Stepping outside the office, the cold air from the air conditioner in the living room heightened the goosebumps creeping on my skin.

What the fuck just happened?

You just got teased, Octavia.

My fingers dug deep into my palms. Arthur must've thought so highly of himself to believe he could elicit such foolish emotions from me and still make me feel like the dumbest person ever. I had told him to do his worst, and he did.

I shouldn't be angry at him. This was my request, and he delivered it perfectly. Arthur was a thief who could not only steal money but also emotions. That made him more dangerous than I had anticipated.

Going for a drink right now wasn't a bad idea. My head was already pounding, and I needed a way to unwind. Raising the loose sleeve of my gown, I moved to the exit. I should be able to find a good bar around the corner. This was London, after all.

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Chapter 18

ARTHUR

There was no way out of what I had done last night. I raked my fingers through my hair and stared at my office desk. It was foolish of me to let my lust consume me. However, it was challenging to resist Ms. Michealson. Despite my attempts at painting her entirely black, my attraction to her didn't seem to waver. Also, our closeness at the window when we tried to hide from McCarthy aroused me in ways I could have never comprehended. So that didn't help matters either.

I hissed and pressed the bridge of my nose. Still, I didn't have to kiss her. Now, things would be quite awkward between us. As if that wasn't bad enough, I even teased her. That was rude of me. Truly rude. It's been years since I fucked, and it was starting to make me lose my sanity.

A flash of memories sparked before my eyes, and I ran my fingers over my lips, remembering the way she opened herself to me as I roamed over her beautiful body like a ravenous animal. Look at me, thinking about that silly vixen. She had always had me by the claws of her fingers. Last night was enough proof.

I had been thinking about it for so long I didn't know when I had fallen asleep in the office, which was something I never did. Someone as perfect as me always had a perfect night and morning routine.

"Yo, bro, have you spoken with Octavia?" Harry asked, entering the office and eating from a small plate garnished with eggs and bacon.

I massaged my eyes, still feeling dizzy from waking up. "No, I haven't."

"I just made breakfast, and she hasn't left her room yet or even answered my knocks."

She was a lazy sleeper as well. That was splendid. Just splendid. Yawning with my hand over my mouth, I rose from my seat and left the office with Harry. Approaching her room, I knocked and looked back at him. He shrugged.

Tired of standing for over a minute, I opened the door. There was no one on her bed. The shower wasn't running. To clarify, I opened the bathroom, and no one was there.

My heartbeat spiked, and beads of sweat began peppered my forehead. Did she go out for a walk or something? I left the room and met with Jane in the living room. She was sharpening her knife with a small rock.

A foolish thought ran through my mind. Surely my sister wouldn't harm Ms. Michaelson. That wasn't her way of doing things. But knowing how badly she wanted me to stop our missions, there was a slight chance, a possibility.

"Jane."

She looked up, her eyes calm.

"Did you see Ms. Michealson?"

"I don't care about her whereabouts."

Just as I expected.

"She's missing."

"That's good then," she said, sharpening her knife. "We won't have to risk our lives anymore."

I pursed my lips. Jane could be such a pain in the ass at times. But if she killed Ms. Michealson, she would be happy now. Leaving the living room with no idea of the American's whereabouts, I decided to check my office for my last resort, Harry trailing behind me.

Sitting at my office desk, I tapped a button under the wooden structure. A sharp hiss sliced through the air; the middle of the table slowly descended, and a series of monitors rose.

"Do you think London cameras would capture her movements?" Harry asked, chewing his bacon loudly. It was irritating. Usually, I wouldn't be bothered, but with Ms. Michealson nowhere to be found, it was bothering the socks off me.

"If Ms Michealson is in London, the cameras should give me an idea where."

I tapped on the screen, and all the cameras in London popped. People going about their everyday activities flooded the screen. There was a couple in one of the screens kissing like maniacs. What was wrong with people? I narrowed my

eyes at the screen and searched for last night's record by adjusting the dates column in the top right corner.

Pressing play, I reclined in my seat. Despite assuming such a relaxed position, my heart was in bits. Why did she leave the apartment without telling anyone? Had she ever been to London before? It was a dangerous world out there, and if she left with that gown I bought for her, she would be subject to attack. It was a limited edition dress, and thieves who knew its worth would strip it off her in no time.

God help me, I was worried. How could I be worried? I detested her. She was an itch in my ear I was trying to get rid of. Without her enticing proposition, I wouldn't have her in my life. That was to show you her lack of value to me without our deal.

Minutes passed, and still, there was no sign of her. I was beginning to give up hope. My heart felt like it was being squeezed by an invisible hand. She had better be safe. I was the one who brought her here to London. If anything happened to her, I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

"Arthur, look at the fucking frame. Man, right there. Right there! The staggering one!" Harry said, pointing frantically.

I zoomed in on the monitor. It was indeed Ms. Michaelson. Her steps were uneven, and she leaned against the wall for support. Some men approached her, but she swung her hand at them. My jaw clenched. She wasn't safe. Something told me what happened next wasn't going to be pretty.

Moments later, after she took a photo with her camera, a car with no plate number pulled up, and two masked men rushed to her. I balled my hands into a fist. They took her into the car, and she kicked her legs in an attempt to struggle.

"What the fuck? None of those hippies are doing anything to save her. They're just watching as she is taken away," Harry said, his voice pitched high.

That was London. At night, no one cared. And Ms. Michealson had fallen victim to the claws of bandits. But something told me McCarthy could have something to do with it. His goons might have been roaming London, still searching for us, and unfortunately, she was seen.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Harry asked, settling his plate on my desk.

I raised a brow. "McCarthy?"

"I mean, it's possible. What are the odds? We barely escaped them."

"What's happening?" Jane asked, entering the room.

Harry pointed at the monitors. "Octavia's been kidnapped, and we suspect McCarthy."

"Have you two considered the possibility of what will happen if it's McCarthy who took her? She'll sell us out. Worse, she could even be working with him in the first place."

My sister's words flew over my head. That was just her hatred for Ms. Michaelson speaking. I needed to find her before she ended up in a situation even my sister wouldn't be proud of. I tapped the monitor and sped it up a little. I spotted the car making a brief stop at a petrol station. The masked men, no longer masked, exited the car with Ms. Michealson. One entered the little shop adjoining the station with her while the other filled up the tank. Moments later, they left with her holding a bottle of water.

What was she doing? I was expecting her to be paranoid since she was kidnapped, but here she was, casually getting a bottle of water to drink while one of the masked men tugged on her arm. Was Jane right about her? I tossed that thought out of my head. It couldn't be possible, could it?

I zoomed in on the station's road sign; Goody's was the name.

I rose and collected a gun from my drawer before I loaded it. Sporting a leather jacket over my rumpled white shirt, I picked up my motorcycle's keys and snatched my helmet from my bookshelf.

"Where are you going?" Jane asked, her eyes balling out.

I wore my black gloves. "To find her."

"Didn't you hear a word I said? "

"She won't sell us out, Jane. She needs me to stop the association she's talking about."

"What if there's no association? What if it's all one big lie?" She turned to Harry. "Back me up here."

Harry winced and looked back and forth between the both of us. He then ran a finger over his lips and raised his hands in surrender. He always did this when he didn't want to side with anyone.

"It's not a lie, Jane. I saw something in McCarthy's office. I have it with me. It's enough proof." I tapped my desk. "Harry, there's a piece of paper in my drawer, just below my Bible. It has some information about a company I'll need some info on. I'll need you to pull some strings with your friends in the government to find out a bit more."

Harry nodded. "I could do that."

"Good. Jane, stay here. I'll be back."

"Arthur, this is madness. You've lost your sanity. "

I ignored her as I walked out.

"Arthur!"

"Arthur!"

I closed my eyes as I left the apartment. Jane may hate Ms. Michaelson enough to leave her to die. But for some stupid reason I couldn't comprehend, imagining her death sent spikes through my heart.

So, today, I had only one mission: save the woman who had caused me so much trouble since we met.

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Chapter 19

OCTAVIA

"Who does he think he is?" I asked no one in particular as I walked down the sidewalk, the cold night air grazing my skin. He dared make me look like a fool. I was only glad I got the chance to get away from him tonight.

Tears brimmed in my eyes, and they rolled down. They were like heavy anchors I couldn't hold back, the pain and embarrassment from tonight sending goosebumps through my skin. I was foolish. Why did I sincerely believe I could give myself to Arthur?

Since my parents' death, I always felt unsafe. No one was there to protect me. All I had was myself. A can of soda lay before me, and I kicked it. When Arthur saved me from the agents who were sent to kill me, a part of me truly believed that I had finally found someone who could protect me from the dangers of the world. It was a feeling that left the moment my parents died.

I sniffed and wiped the tears burning my cheeks. The drink I had from the bar I just left did nothing. It didn't drown the pain. The shame was unlike anything I had ever experienced. How would I be able to face him again with my pride?

"Stupid, stupid, Arthur." I chuckled, and the couple infront of me shifted to the side, the lady holding her boyfriend tightly. I turned to them and smiled. "You don't know how lucky the both of you are!"

Why did Arthur's actions hurt me so much? I hated him. He was everything I've been against: Injustice. Thieves were the most prominent pioneers in corruption, and Arthur was the greatest of them all. Pouting, I dug my hand into my purse and retrieved my camera.

It was drizzling, and the purple neon lights emanating from a bar ahead spilled violet beams across the wet sidewalks, their reflection creating a beautiful picture I needed to capture. Holding my camera, I tried to steady my hand. It was sweaty, and my wet fingers struggled to keep hold.

The camera clicked after minutes of struggling. I looked at the image. It had a blur, but the imperfection made the picture perfect. I smiled. Perhaps I still had something that brought joy to me. I didn't need anyone in my life, especially a thief. I could do this on my own. I could stop those criminals myself. I owed it to my parents. I owed it to the millions of children out there who were bound to face a similar fate if no one stopped the governments of the world from ruining the future of the young ones.

A sharp screech caught my attention. In seconds, a leather-smelling hand covered my mouth, and my camera fell off my hand. Tears flooded my eyes, and the world around me blurred as I was taken away. The car door slammed shut, and the thrumming of the car drowned my yells.

A hard blow landed on my temple, and a ring reverberated through my head before I succumbed to the darkness.

***

Sharp, searing hiss.

Ringing ears.

Burning skin.

These sensations flooded me as I opened my eyes, adjusting to the situation around me. The soft thrumming of an engine reminded me that I was still inside the car I had been abducted in. One of the masked men was sitting at the front, and next to me was the other person. My wrists burned; they were bound tightly with a rope. It was so tight it dug into my flesh, leaving reddish marks over my skin.

The night sped by me, and my breath slowly normalised. I was in trouble. If I didn't act smart, who knew what would happen to me? I should have stayed back at the apartment. I was foolish to leave without telling anyone my destination.

Arthur. Would he find me? I shuffled to assume a comfortable position in my seat. At such a difficult time, I was already thinking about a saviour. No one was coming for me. This wasn't a movie. I was in the hands of two dangerous men, and from their strength when they took me, fighting them would be a suicide mission.

The sides of my temples burned. I hissed and closed my eyes, aiming to let the pain subside.

Think.

Think.

What could I do to escape this situation? A physical confrontation was already out of the question. I had to figure something out quickly. I glanced at both of them. Their eyes were lifeless. This wasn't their first rodeo. Fuck, I was in real trouble this time.

A ring seared through the air, and the driver picked up the call. Muffled sounds came from his phone, and he kept nodding and saying he understood the person on the other end. Eventually, he settled the phone down and looked over his shoulders.

"What happened?" the man beside me asked, his voice cold and slicing through the quiet air.

"Change of plans. We're going to the old wood house."

"No more America?"

"Apparently, she is taking his jet for a meeting with the boss."

My stupid reporter ass was about to ask who the boss was, but I sealed my mouth shut. If there was one thing I had learnt while in Arthur's world, it was that the mouth could do a lot of damage, especially sneezing. The masked man in the driver's seat tapped the GPS screen on the dashboard, and the compass icon at the top right showed the coordinates. *Northwest*.

This was it. This was my fucking chance. I held my stomach and fell over, letting out a loud cry.

"What the fuck is happening back there?" the driver questioned.

I winced and rolled to the foot of the car. "Ah, it hurts! It fucking hurts!"

The goon beside me tugged hard on my arm, but I refused to budge. If there was any time to play my cards right, it was this moment. I groaned and locked my legs together, feigning another loud, agonising cry.

"He wants her in one piece, man!" The driver yelled. "What the fuck is happening to her?!"

"I don't know! I don't know!"

"Ah, ah, my fucking stomach! Ah, it hurts!"

"What's happening to you?" the masked man next to me asked, lifting me off from the floor. At this point, fake tears were already flooding my eyes, and they poured like a waterfall, my pouted mouth quivering.

I winced. "I need to drink something. I need to—"

Once again, I cried out.

"Is there any water in the car?" the back seat masked man asked, his voice high-pitched with panic

Knowing they needed me in one piece made my plan a piece of cake. I had to discover some sort of way to leave a tip for whoever was coming to find me. It could be the police or—

Or Arthur?

Of course not. There was no way I would put my life in his hands. Depending on him would be a grave mistake. The car pulled to a sharp stop, almost sending me and the masked man through the windshield.

"Vincent, what the fuck, man?!"

Registered. The name of the driver was Vincent. He hissed and dragged off his mask. Looking over his shoulder, his eyes were cold, and the healed scar line running over his eyelid to his cheeks made him look more menacing.

"Take off your mask and go in there with her to get something to drink. I'll use this opportunity to fill up the gas," he said.

The other masked man took off his mask, revealing a receding hairline that formed a sharp "v" over his gleaming forehead. There was a glare in his eyes. It seemed he didn't like taking orders from Vincent. Digging his hand behind him, he brought out a gun and pointed it at my face.

The silver rays of the moonlight bounced off the barrel, a sheen lining the metal. My palms grew sticky with sweat, and I gulped. I had never been held at gunpoint before.

"If you say or do anything foolish, I wouldn't mind killing anyone in the vicinity. Let's see how much your conscience would cope with the death of people in your hands."

A shiver ran down my spine. It wasn't the type I got when I was with Arthur. This one was sharp, scarring my spine as it ran down. Stiffening my

back, I followed him as we both left the car. He tucked the gun in his waist and covered it with his shirt.

"Move."

I did as I was told. We entered the small grocery store while Vincent stayed behind to fill the gas. The smell of bleach mixed with the smell of freshly made popcorn assaulted my nostrils. Rows of grocery shelves lined the store, and it was empty except the blonde lady behind the counter, chewing her gum loudly.

"Go get your water, and I'll be here, listening. Any stupid movements and the lady is dead."

The distance between us and the lady wasn't much. All it took were four steps to reach her. Anything I said could easily be heard, so I had to be smart. I leaned forward to the lady, my heart racing, the hairs at the back of my neck standing as I felt the man's blistering gaze on my back.

"Do you have any *northwest* sparkling water?" I asked.

The lady raised her pierced eyebrows. "We don't serve American water here."

I pressed my brows together. "Fine, fine, just get me any regular water you have."

I had done my part. All that was left was for the British police to do the rest. The lady smacked her gum loudly and went to the freezer behind her. Raising it, she returned with a bottle of cold water and handed it to me. The coldness ran up my arm, striking me at the back of my neck and making my body shudder.

"That would be ten pounds. "

"Ten pounds. How is that even—"

The abductor slammed the money on the counter and jerked his head, signalling we should leave. I looked over my shoulders and walked away, irritated by the lady's disdainful stare. It was a pity she couldn't notice the oddness between me and the man. Well, she would claim it was none of her business, even if she noticed something odd.

Women protecting women, my ass. She was the least of my problems now. I had to find a way to escape if possible. Somehow, the tip I left behind didn't leave me much room for confidence. I wanted to be the architect of my safety.

"Get in," Vincent said, shoving me inside the car. The other man joined me in the backseat, and they started driving.

We travelled past smaller provinces with a few apartment buildings, and soon, thick forests began siding both sides of the road. It went on for minutes, hours and hours, and soon, my ass began feeling numb on the seat. The man held his pistol at my face, and the thought of having my death just a few meters away from me sent threads of fear through my body.

Vincent, in the driver's seat, made a sharp turn into a dirt road, and his headlights tore through the darkness like two sharp, beaming spears. The dirt road transformed into uneven ground, and soon, I was in a thick forest; shrubs, cut logs and canopies of high trees obscuring the moon's glow, little trickles managing to find their way through the spaces the leaves made.

"Where are you taking me to?"

The men ignored me. My gaze frantically darted around, my breath racing. I held the hem of my gown tightly. I wanted to blame someone so badly. I tried to blame Arthur for mistreating me, but I couldn't because, at the end of the day, I was the one who decided to leave his home with no decent knowledge of how the streets of London operated at night.

After countless minutes of travelling, we arrived at a rickety wooden building with half the roof missing, perhaps a victim to termites. A car was parked ahead, its engines thrumming. The car's rear lights glowed red, cutting past the yellow headlights of the car I was in. A silhouette stood behind the vehicle.

Vincent turned off the car, and his partner dragged me out roughly, leading me towards the man in the dark. He stepped forward, and I balled my fingers.

"McCarthy," I said.

He smirked. "Didn't think I would let you go so easily, did you?" I gulped, and he closed the distance between us, the smell of whiskey rushing into my nostrils. The stupid fucker was drunk. "Do you know what your silly little interference at the mansion party has done?"

"Exposed what a fucking criminal you are."

A searing pain shot up my face, racking up to my brain and threatening to fucking break my skull open. My vision blurred, and I held my throbbing cheeks, feeling the stream of blood drip down my face. He had cut me with the stupid ring on his hand as he punched me.

"Raise her."

The two goons lifted me once more, and this time, there was a gun below my jaw. The barrel grazed my chin, and a sinister smile spread on McCarthy's face.

"Now, listen here," he said. "I do not give a fuck about you. You'll be free if you answer one question."

Just one question. It sounded too good to be true.

"I'm curious about the man I saw you with yesterday. Who is he, and where does he live?"

My lips parted slightly. Weeks ago, my answer would be simple. I would have told McCarthy everything he needed to know. But now, I couldn't sacrifice that silly Brit to save my sorry ass. I mean, doing so would make *me* the lesser human. He had saved me twice from the claws of danger, and if I sent him to his death, I would be the monster here.

Besides, it would suck not having someone to piss off occasionally. I chuckled and looked to the ground. Perhaps I had a soft spot for him. I remembered how he looked the first time I brought him to my home. His face was the true definition of disgust. His excessive formalities were also something I found quite funny.

A thrill zapped over my lips. I touched them. I could still remember him claiming me. Fuck, this man had my head on a spiral. I hated him. I did. I truly did. All these stupid thoughts I was having were just my brain acting up.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Fuck off."

Another fist collided with my face. This time, it was above my left eyelid and waves of shock washed down my head like a storm. I hissed, my knees weak and threatening to collapse.

McCarthy rubbed the cold steel of his gun against my face. "You don't seem to understand the severity of this situation, do you?" He sniffed loudly, and his facial muscles had weird spasms. "I need to know his name. We could both survive." He squeezed my cheeks so hard it burned. "We can both leave here in one piece. *Who* is he? Tell me, come on. "

He used the word 'we.' McCarthy was in danger as well. That only meant one thing. He wanted me alive. So if I were to make a run for it, he wouldn't shoot. But was I willing to take that risk? The forest around us had towering trees.

Getting lost under them would be a suicide attempt. But staying here with McCarthy didn't guarantee my safety as well.

"I need to pee," I said.

"What the fuck are you saying?"

"I need to pee, McCarthy. Let me pee, and I'll be in the right frame of mind to tell you what you need to know."

McCarthy looked at his two goons, and Vincent just shrugged.

"And I need a cup to pee in as well."

McCarthy hissed. "Fine, fine. Get her cup and escort her to a corner. And watch her."

Watch me? Had these men lost their decency? I was given the cup I asked for, and they escorted me to a corner close to the forest. I squatted and raised my gown. Their disgusting eyes stared at me. Settling the cup, I urinated, smiling, knowing what I was about to do would catch them entirely off guard.

Standing with the cup full of the warm golden liquid, the goons walked towards me. I splashed them in the face with my urine and took off. The forest enveloped me, and the yells of McCarthy echoed in the quiet night air. The revs of a car engine blasted in the distance, and beams of yellow light began shining behind me.

Fuck.

They were chasing me in their car.

The terrain of the forest wasn't so rough that a car couldn't navigate on it. It became a race between my determination to escape and the speed of a potentially powerful V8 engine coming after my dear life. I ran, fists clenched, blood dripping down my forehead and licking the corner of my eye, stinging me sharply.

I fell.

I stood up.

I ran.

I fell again.

I stood.

I ran.

It was a relentless cycle, and they were closing in on me. McCarthy's voice, yelling commands overwhelmed the thrumming of his car's engine. What would happen if I was caught? I couldn't let that happen. I was running without any idea of where I was heading to.

A glimmer of red was in the distance. What was that? It had a buzz-like sound. It approached me. Was it a drone? The voice that followed sent a waterfall of relief through my adrenaline-charged body.

"Ms. Michealson."

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Chapter 20

ARTHUR

My bike's engine revved as I sped past the buildings flanking both sides of the road. I maneuvered dangerously around tight corners cars had made, and they blared their horns in response. If I didn't move quickly enough, who knew what would happen to Ms. Michalson? I steered the bike, feeling her camera's bulge forming in my jacket's pocket.

This was one of her prized possessions. I could remember clearly that it was one of the first things she asked for when she woke up after my knockout. My heart pinched at the thought. I had been quite rough with her. Knocking her out without her consent was wrong. But in the end, I was doing this all to protect her. I didn't care for her as a human. But I cared enough for the things she had to offer. She was a business partner, nothing more, and after this mission was over, our paths would diverge.

Through the visor of my helmet, I could spot the petrol station in the distance. The lights from the convenience store beside the station cast yellow beams of light from its windows. Pulling my motorcycle to a stop, I dismounted.

I scanned the area. Flashes of what I saw on the monitors flooded my head. Balling my gloved hands into a fist, the soft squeaking sound of leather against leather slivered the air. I raised the helmet's visor and marched into the store.

The reporter's voice on the news elicited from the TV, bouncing off the walls. A lady who looked like she was tossed out of a gothic novel where she once belonged to an emo rock band was behind the counter. She watched me, and her shoulders stiffened. I closed our distance, and she cleared her throat, beginning to chew her bloody gum loudly.

"Some people were here," I said.

"Many people come here."

I sighed. "An American."

"Oh."

"Ring a bell?"

She nodded and continued chewing her gum.

"Did anything odd happen while she was in here?"

"What do you mean?" The lady raised her pierced brow. "She's American. Everything about her is odd."

This foolish lady wasn't giving me what I wanted. There had to be something, something I could hold onto. The fact she came inside a store to buy water while being abducted didn't sit well with me. A lady like her, who was smart enough to detect my elaborate scheme, should be smart enough to escape a situation like this. I hated saying this, but for once, I needed the American to be smart enough to help me.

The goth girl looked at the ceiling with a soft tilt of the head, perhaps lost in thought. "Oh, she made a bloody stupid order, now that I think of it."

My eyebrows raised, and I settled my gloved fingers on the counter. "What was it?"

"Northwest sparkling water," the lady said with a bored drawl.

I narrowed my eyes. *Northwest sparkling water.* There was nothing like that, was there? Even if Americans had a penchant for odd names, they couldn't possibly name a bottle of water based on coordinates.

Coordinates.

Coordinates!

Ms. Michealson was giving me coordinates. Jesus, what a sly woman she was. She should never be underestimated again.

I smirked and put on my visor, turning and heading to the exit. "Good girl."

Even I wouldn't have thought of something like that in such a tense situation. I mean, I would've found a way to escape, but to give coordinates by ordering a drink? Perhaps she had a bit of me in her, which was quite adorable.

I hopped on the bike and tapped a button on my helmet, a UI display popping up. Tapping the visor from outside, I placed a call to Harry.

A soft crackle sounded, and Harry's voice came through. "What's up, man?"

"I need you to release any of my drones nearest to me."

"Have you found something?"

"I believe so."

"Alright," Keyboards clacked, "releasing drone 1267."

In seconds, a weak whirring of blades rushed above me, red glinting light glaring in the dark sky. A pop-up monitor appeared on one side of my visor; it was the visuals the drone was capturing.

I started my bike and went after it. My jacket billowed in the wind, and I pushed the engine to its limit, trying to keep up with the drone.

"Harry."

"Yeah, man?"

"Search for any frequency modulation radios with a built-in GPS in the northwest location."

"Any reason why?"

I followed a sharp bend. "Most car radios use FM. Since the car that took Ms. Michealson doesn't have a plate number, we could track it with the radio."

"Damn, that's smart."

"I'm Arthur Knight, Harry." My engine revved. "Don't sound so surprised."

"Ugh, such a dick."

"I can still hear you."

"All the more reason to say it one more time." Harry exhaled over the phone. "Alright, I've got something."

"What?"

The drone ascended and hovered over the forest, beside me.

"Thermal vision coming up."

The visual changed, and the heat map was on the visor's display. There were thermal silhouettes of squirrels, birds and a moving box.

A moving box?

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a fucking car racing through a forest."

"Why would a—"

"Look, someone is running away from it."

I zoomed in on the figure. That was a lady. I changed my perspective and spotted three more thermal structures inside the car. They were chasing her. That had to be Ms. Michaelson.

"Harry, you know what to do," I said, making a sharp turn and entering the forest.

Leaves and branches slapped against my visor, occasionally blinding my vision. Luckily, the sharp beam of light from my motorcycle led the way. The drone expertly navigated through the narrow spaces the towering trees created. Soon, it approached her, and Harry slowed the device down.

While riding, time seemed to slow as I noticed the scars on her face. There were wounds over her eyebrows, and a sharp cut was below her eyes. My chest flared with heat, and I pushed my bike over its limit, riding on a log of wood and flying over a little ditch, landing so hard my thighs ached.

"Ms. Michealson," I said, my heart in knots.

She paused, panting heavily. On hearing my voice, tears streamed down her eyes. What had they done to her? Heat flooded my chest, and threads of rage thundered through me. My sanity was slowly slipping, and seeing her hurt made me regret accepting her gig in the first place. This was precisely what happened the last time I let someone too close. They got killed, and my heart was broken.

Not today.

I won't let it happen today.

The blood spilt down her face, and it burned that I couldn't be present and feel her, pull her in for a hug and tell her it would be okay. I was meant to protect her till all this was over.

"Who did this to you?" I asked.

"McCarthy... I-I refused to tell him about you, and he beat me up," she said, sobbing. Through the drone's lens, I could see the car's headlights coming closer.

"Arthur, your sister is outside the forest waiting," Harry said.

"She came?"

A tone sounded throughout my helmet. "Of course I came, you bloody prick. You're my twin; if you die, a part of me dies as well."

"It's good to have you back, Sister," I said, zooming past the thick barks of trees. "Harry, lead Ms. Michealson outside with the drone." My gaze blurred with tears as I saw the battered form of the little vixen—*my* little vixen. "Ms. Michealson, follow the drone; you'll be safe."

She sprinted, her desperate pants the last thing I heard before disconnecting from the drone. My vision was barraged with a haze of red. I had only one thing on my mind: murder.

"Arthur, where the bloody hell are you going?!" My sister screamed over the phone. "Ms. Michaelson is safe now."

They touched her. They hurt her. They made her cry.

I flexed my jaw muscles. "Take her somewhere safe, Sister. I have people to kill."

***

A loud crash tore through the air, and the surrounding birds went on a fast flight. Tendrils of smoke emanated from the engine of the crashed car. My bullet marks were over the paint job, and the window glasses were shattered, streaks of crimson blood washing down what was left of them. The upper half of a body had broken through the rear window, and little shards of glass pierced through the man's head. On the other end of the car, a severed head rested on the bonnet, scarlet liquid pooling around it. If I could redo this chaos I created, I would in a heartbeat.

Exiting my motorcycle, I strode to the car. The doors barged open, and McCarthy staggered out, streaks of blood running down his face. His eyes were circling in fear, and his lips quivered. There was no running away. He was my prey for the night, and I would make him regret ever laying his hand on a woman.

My woman.

He dug his hand behind him and retrieved a gun, pointing the barrel at me. "Don't move! Don't move, or I'll shoot!"

I smirked at his empty threats. He was too disoriented to even pull a stable shot. Sadly, he would miss even if I were just a metres away from him.

"Get away from me!" He pointed at me. "You're the devil! You're the devil!"

I took another step closer. "You really shouldn't be tossing around such daring accusations."

He tripped over a log of wood, his gun slipping out of his hand. The fool was intoxicated. Covering our distance, I grabbed the collar of his shirt and slammed

him against the body of his car, denting it. He coughed, blood sputtering from his mouth onto my visor.

I squeezed his face, his eyes threatening to shut close. "Tell me, McCarthy, did your father beat your mum every day?"

"Fuck you."

"Unfortunately, I don't sail on the other side of the sea," I said and sunk my fist into his stomach.

He wheezed, his hand clutching his shirt. Tears streamed down his cheeks, and I smiled, grabbing a handful of his hair. What was happening to me? I was enjoying torturing this man. Was I so annoyed by the wound he inflicted on Ms. Michealson that he managed to drive me over the brink of insanity?

Spit drooled from his mouth, and he looked at me through my visor. "Go to hell."

My fist tightened. He showed no remorse. If anything, he probably didn't even know what he had done. He was too drunk to even comprehend a thing. I could tell from the stench of whiskey oozing from his mouth.

"I'm going to kill you, McCarthy." I laughed, and my eyes balled out. "I'm going to kill you, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it."

The constant trickle of liquid from under the car drew my attention. I touched and perceived it. It was petrol. Taking a handful, I smeared a substantial amount over his face and stepped back, clicking open my lighter. I lit it and took a few more steps back.

I tossed it, watching the instant combustion take place. Plumes of smoke rose into the air, the reddish-orange flames reflecting against my visor. McCarthy's screams were satisfying to hear. He needed to experience hell on earth before he went to the real one. His hands flailed in the air as he rolled on the ground, the flames consuming him without mercy.

Amidst the chaos, a sharp ring echoed. It wasn't my ringing tone. I followed the sound to find a phone lying on the grass. The flickering light on its screen grazed the greenery. Mr. Knight was the contact's name. I picked up the phone from the ground, recalling that McCarthy and Ms. Hannah had spoken about this person.

I placed the phone on my ear after picking up the call. There was silence. After ten seconds, the person on the other end hung up.

Whoever this Mr. Knight was, I had to find him.

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Chapter 21

OCTAVIA

Water.
Cold.
Pain.

These three sensations plagued my body as I sat in the tub, the water from the shower raining on me. My hair stuck to my skin, water droplets licking my fresh wounds. I bit back the pain, letting the warm tears flow down my cheeks.

Shock waves ran through my body, and I brought my knees closer to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. I thought I was going to die. What if I died? Would anyone remember me? Would I reach the gates of heaven and tell God I had achieved anything?

I would just be known as Octavia Michaelson, the reporter. Biting my lips, I looked at the bottom of the tub. Little streaks of blood streamed along the running water. Cuts were all over me: my legs, my arms and my face. This all started with a silly interview. Now, here I was, my limbs weak, my resolve crumbling.

Weak.

Yes, I was aware. I knew I was weak. I have never known who I was or would be the next day. My life was a fibre strand, as thin as my resolve, leaving me dangling on the edge of oblivion and destruction. I could never do anything correctly, not even set things right after the death of my parents. I had a golden chance here to ensure no child grew up like I did.

Arthur's image popped into my head. I exhaled shakily. Despite not liking his kind, he still came to my rescue, and he was out there, perhaps fighting with McCarthy. When Jane brought me back to the apartment, she refused to tell me anything about Arthur's situation. Worry had consumed me so much that I decided to come to the shower to wash away the thoughts. As I washed one away, another came—my incompetence. It was a never-ending roller coaster.

There was a soft clank in the room. I rose and turned off the shower, cold wrapping its chilly claws around me. Shivering, I wrapped myself with a white towel and exited the bathroom. In the corner of the room, by my bedside, Arthur held a cup of tea and next to him was a surgical tray and some iodine.

"Arthur, you're here."

He ignored my statement and headed to me, handing over the cup of tea. This was unlike him. I was expecting him to scold me. He went to my wardrobe and withdrew a furry coat. Without saying a word, he wrapped it around my shoulders, the warmth enveloping me. Guilt cursed my conscience. I had put him through hell ever since I met him.

"Drink up," he finally said, returning to the surgical tray. Strapping some latex gloves, he watched me.

His gaze burned my skin, and I sipped from the steaming cup of tea, nervous to make eye contact. I felt so desperate to make the usual *tea* joke but restrained myself. I was only trying to lighten the atmosphere. But one topic seemed more logical to talk about.

"McCarthy."

With no emotion in his voice, he said, "Is dead. I killed him."

A chilly trend ran down my spine, stiffening as I sat on my bed. Suddenly, the tea turned sour, and I couldn't drink anymore. Just when I was beginning to sympathise with him, he decided to remind me of who he was—a thief and a murderer. It would be hypocritical to say I hadn't put him in a situation to kill. But there had to be other ways to resolve the problem.

"Why did you kill him?" I asked, my voice low and weak. My throat was dry and tight despite the tea I drank. I settled the teacup on the bedside table and crossed my arms as I looked up at him, his jaw tensing. "Do you derive pleasure in doing it? Tell me."

"They hurt you, Ms. Michealson. That's enough reason."

"And that justifies killing," I said, settling on my bed, my fingers holding the bridge of my nose. "I'm an accomplice in all this. I know about your killings but can't say anything."

He poured some alcohol on surgical cotton and picked it. "They deserved to die."

"No one deserves to die, Arthur! Don't you fucking get it? Killing them makes you as bad as—"

He covered our distance so fast my breath was cut short, my lungs expanding so much that my chest began to hurt. His hot breath fanned dangerously over my forehead.

"Keep acting ungrateful Ms. Michealson, and I'll fix that attitude of yours." His voice was laced with an iron fist, and my knees buckled. I couldn't challenge him. I knew how strong he was. "Now, be a good girl and sit down while I clean you up."

Inhaling shakily, I sat on the bed. Shame gripped my slumped shoulders. All it took him was one sentence, and I was already as quiet as a library. I flexed my jaw and watched him sit cross-legged on the floor. He raised my knee and inspected my cuts.

"Such a lousy runner," he murmured and gently rubbed the sterile cotton on my wound. I hissed, ready to lash back at him, but he looked up, our eyes locking. His gaze was so powerful it sent my cheeks aflame, and I looked away.

"Why are you looking at me that way?"

He shrugged. "It's a shame to see such a beautiful face get cut. All the more reason McCarthy deserved what he got." He wrapped his hand around my calf, and a thrill ran up my thighs, sending wild signals to my core. "If I have to kill him again for hurting you, I would do so a thousand times. Every lady must always be protected. Even the annoying ones like you."

A river of warmth streamed through me. I didn't know which topic to address first. He had called me beautiful. He called my *face* beautiful. The hairs on the back of my neck stood. He also seemed bent on being chivalrous. I didn't know if it had to do with the fact that he believed women were weak or he genuinely was a gentleman.

"Your camera, you dropped it."

My eyes widened. "Yes! My camera. Where's it?"

"I have it with me."

I exhaled.

"But it's in horrible condition. You might need to get a new one."

I shook my head, not wanting to believe it. "I can't. I don't have the money for a new one."

He stood and picked up more cotton. His gaze softened as he stood over me, cleaning the small cut below my eye. For a man whose hands had killed many before my eyes, he was gentle when he cupped my cheeks. He came closer to my face as he tidied up the cut above my eyebrow. Connecting our gazes; my heart raced, the proximity warming my cheeks. Just an inch closer, and I could kiss him.

I blinked excessively. What the fuck? Why would I want to kiss him?! I mean, we had kissed just once, and it was no big deal. Okay, maybe it was great, but that didn't excuse me wanting more. This man was becoming an addiction. The conflicting sides of good and evil were tormenting me. One moment, he was sweet to me; the other, he was killing people like it was a sport.

"Do you swim?"

I shook my head.

"Shame, I wanted to take you to Ruislip Lido Beach. It's a great view and a good way to unwind after a series of crazy events."

"I didn't know London had beaches."

"The city itself doesn't. But we have some in neighbouring towns." He placed the last plaster over my forehead and removed the surgical gloves. Entering my bathroom, I watched him wash his hands. They were veiny, and the water streamed slowly over those bulges, my mouth parting as the most unholy thoughts filled my head.

"I feel you watching, Ms. Michaelson."

I exhaled and tore my gaze away, looking anywhere other than the bathroom. Fuck, this was embarrassing. His footfalls announced that he was in the bedroom again. I needed to bring something else to simmer down my embarrassment.

"My camera, we were talking about it."

"Yeah," he said, opening my wardrobe and tossing a nightgown onto the bed. He turned his back, twirling a finger in the air to signify that I should dress quickly. "We'll go shopping tomorrow for a new one."

I removed my towel, and it whispered against the floor as it fell in waves. Not trusting the man to keep his eyes to himself, I quickly put on the nightgown and picked up the towel, clearing my throat.

"I just told you I don't have the money."

He nodded and went to an armchair in the corner of the room, sitting with his legs spread wide in a manner that seemed inviting. Next to him was a small coffee table. He dug his hand into his back, retrieving a gun before placing it softly on the table.

"I will buy you a new camera." He sighed heavily and massaged his forehead. "Now, be quiet and go to bed."

Rude asshole. I climbed into bed after hanging my towel in the bathroom, and Arthur was still sitting in the chair, his back reclined. Did he plan to sleep here?

I asked him, "What are you doing?"

"Keeping watch."

"What? It's not like anyone's going to come here and kill me."

"I must watch you sleep," he said, looking out the window, the stars twinkling in his blue eyes. "I will never let you get hurt again, Ms. Michaelson. Until this mission is over, I will always protect you."

"Why are you doing this? Why do you care?"

"I don't care. If you die, so does my chance at making a bloody ton of money." He rested his head backwards, assuming a more relaxed position. "Besides, I am a gentleman, and a gentleman must always protect a lady. Even a cunning vixen such as you."

"You realise you're a meanie, right?"

Throwing his head back, he chuckled softly, a deep baritone anchoring his voice. "And you love that, don't you, Ms. Michealson?"

"I don't," I lied. There was a deep allure to his teases, and for some reason, I didn't want him to stop.

"Go to bed."

"What about you?"

"I won't sleep until you wake up."

With those words, I closed my eyes. For the first time in my life since the death of my parents, I had someone watching over me—someone who wanted

me safe. And despite knowing it was for his selfish reasons, I enjoyed the feeling and wanted to bask in it while it lasted.

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Chapter 22

OCTAVIA

My steps were heavy, and so was my head. Pain raced through my limbs like a severing knife, cutting deep into my muscles, letting the blood spill into a pool of anguish. I massaged my temples. They buzzed. The feeling was similar to when a loud bell rang next to someone. My footsteps echoed through the narrow corridor as I advanced.

The distant din of conversation reached my ears. Harry's voice was more evident. I had awakened, expecting to see Arthur in the armchair where I last saw him. But he was nowhere to be found, not even in the bathroom.

Arriving in the living room, shafts of sunlight from the tall windows came at me, glaring with comforting warmth. I closed my eyes, enjoying the feeling. This was peace. Peace divine. Peace immaculate. I hadn't felt this relaxed in years. Perhaps it had something to do with Arthur's speech yesterday—his vow to protect me.

"She's alive," Harry said, pointing at me.

Jane was with him at the dining table, eating a bowl of cereal. Her gaze wasn't as harsh as usual. Instead, it was empty. I couldn't read her. Such a revelation disturbed me.

"How's your head?" Jane asked.

My eyes balled. This couldn't be reality. I had to be in some sort of alien simulation. Jane Knight had just asked about my well-being, and not only that, but she sounded genuine while doing so. What the fuck happened to her?

"It seems she lost her hearing," she muttered, taking another spoonful of cereal. She left the room and returned with a bowl of cornflakes filled to the brim with milk, setting it on the dining table. "Eat, you look like a bloody mess."

My lips parted slightly as I sat at the table and held the spoon. This could be a ploy. It might be a clever move to delete me from existence. Why was she being nice all of a sudden?

I shifted my gaze to Harry, and he was gaping at Jane, his jaw on the floor.

Jane raised her brows. "What?"

"Have you been drinking?" he asked.

"What? What do you mean?"

"You're nice to her. *I'm* the only American you're nice to."

Jane shrugged. "Well, she didn't rat us out." She pointed at me with her spoon. "But that doesn't mean I won't keep an eye on you. Now, eat up."

An unusual cold wrapped around me. I was still dressed in nothing but the nightgown I had worn to bed. I shouldn't have left my furry coat back in the room. Taking the spoon, I sipped from the milk in the bowl. There was no funny taste. Besides, if Jane wanted me dead, I would be minced human meat by now.

The bowl of cereal was cleared up in minutes, and luckily, I was still alive. I still hadn't seen any sign of Arthur. He said he'd take me shopping today.

"Where's Arthur?" I asked.

Harry pointed at a corner. There was a staircase. I hadn't seen a staircase there before. Following his directions, I went after Arthur. He had better not plan on bailing. He promised me a camera, and I must get one.

My feet settled on the first step, a cold slither running up my body. Grunts. More grunts. The closer I got to the top, the louder the grunts became. At the top, there was a long wooden wall with a glass double door. In the middle of the room was a boxing ring, and in the corner, I spotted a shirtless Arthur throwing heavy jabs at a punching bag. His hands were clothed with white boxing wraps.

I pressed my hand against the cold glass of the window and watched him. His skin glistened with sweat, and each jab he threw flexed his deltoids, my mouth watering at the sight. I shook my head. *Pull yourself together.* He was just a man. He was just like any other man.

Nothing special.

Nothing special except for the fact that he was willing to kill for me. Knowing he had such a vengeful cause for my sake was conflicting. In one part of my mind, I despised it. Killing people was never right. However, the other part of me—the part that made my legs lock together and tremble at the thought—craved that feeling.

I opened the door and walked in.

"Ms. Michealson," he said without looking back.

"How did you—"

"Two steps per 1.5 seconds. That's how quick you move."

My cheeks burned. How did he know so much about me, when I knew so little about him? Now closer, I could see the scars on his back. It was an interwoven web of healed, inflamed flesh, leaving black, dried, dead skin in its wake.

"Arthur," I muttered, briskly covering our distance. My heart slammed against my ribcage. Who did this to him? "Arthur, your back."

He hugged the punching bag, steadying it. Turning to me, his chest rose and fell heavily, his blue eyes gazing at me with a steely backbone. He tilted his head to the side and combed his stray locks of dark hair before speaking.

"What do you want?"

"I actually came here to remind you about my camera." I rounded him and extended my hand to touch his scars, but he quickly caught my wrist, his oceanic gaze hardening. "What happened to you?"

"None of your business."

"Tell me."

He released my hand and sighed. "Are reporters always this nosy?"

"Your back, it's a fucking mess."

"Indeed."

"Tell me what happened."

"I'm not inclined to meet such hefty demands."

His breathing quickened. Whatever this was, it was important, and my curiosity always got the best of me. Now, I badly needed to know what caused him such disastrous scars.

"I'll box you for it."

"Pardon?"

I picked up a boxing glove and entered the ring, doing my best impression of foot dances. A small smile played on his lips. Dimples. He was a beautiful man. But unfortunately, I couldn't fall for a thief. It went against all I stood for. Politicians, con men, robbers, and the likes of them all belonged to one category

—thieves. Arthur was the embodiment of everything I had grown up hating, and yet, I let him kiss me. And yet, I let him thrust rows and rows of pistoning pleasure through me. Fuck, this man was a drug. A fucking row of cocaine that I couldn't get enough of.

"Are you scared I'll beat ya?" I asked, still doing my little foot dances.

He entered the ring. "What if you lose?"

"I don't know."

He went to the edge of the ring and settled on the corner support, his arms crossed. "I have a better idea."

"What?" I asked.

"I'll do to you whatever I want."

"W-what do you mean by that?"

"Come for me, Ms. Michaelson," he said, stalking towards me, his eyes menacing. It felt like I was his prey, and he was taking his time savoring my appearance before he launched. What had I gotten myself into? "Show me what you've got. Pray to your God you don't lose because the things I plan to do to you would have the devil on his knees."

I gulped and charged at him. As expected, he ducked, dodging my swing. *Shit*. If only I had moved an inch faster. I rolled my eyes. Who was I kidding? This man could have me on my knees in seconds if he wished. He was having a fun time while making me look like a fool.

Spinning on my heel to face him, his large shadow loomed over me and his hand wrapped around my throat. I was cornered against the support, my breath racing. Our closeness was intoxicating, the sweaty scent from his forearms whisking into my nostrils. It was warm and satisfying, making me want to inhale more of him.

"You lose, Ms. Michalson."

I gulped. With no warning, he raised my legs, resting them on the ropes of the boxing ring. I was exposed, a cold sensation crawling on my thighs. He closed in, untying his boxing wraps. A whirl of anticipation shot through me, my stomach fluttering with butterflies.

"What are you doing?"

He ignored me, wrapping the sweaty boxing wrap around my mouth. His salty sweat dripped down my throat, the aftertaste making me roll my eyes. He tasted so fucking good. Once he was done bounding my mouth, he held me by the jaw, his gaze burning with flames of lust from the pit of hell.

"You've been a bad girl, Ms Michaelson," he said, exiting the ring and grabbing my wrists. His hot breath tickled my neck, the skin in the area tightening. The sticky boxing wraps went over my wrists, and he pulled me to the corner support, my breath hitching. "And I'm going to teach you a lesson."

He entered the ring again, his presence making my body pulse. There was something about his sticky, sweaty presence that made my mind go feral. I wouldn't say I liked this. I fucking hated this. Here I was, tied up and vulnerable, and all I could only think of was getting touched in the most unholy way possible.

My lips parted as he covered our distance. "You're not even struggling," he said, placing a thumb over my lips and parting them. "You love this, don't you?"

I shook my head.

"That didn't look very convincing."

"Mjkemdm," I mumbled.

He raised the skin above my wetness, his fingers sliding up and down my entrance. A shiver ran through my body, and I dropped my head, wanting to let out a moan but stifled by the boxing wrap on my mouth. He raised my nightgown and rested it on my hips.

"I can't hear you, Ms. Michaelson," he said. He slipped a finger in, and I clenched around him. "Fuck."

Hearing him say the word *'fuck'* for the first time blinded my vision, the whole world spinning around me. Why did he have to sound so fucking hot when he said a word as common as *'fuck?'* He thrusted another finger in, my wetness making squelching sounds. I wanted to assist him. My fingers tingled as they ached to rub over my exposed clit while he thrust his fingers in me like a jackhammer. He was persistent, keeping his pace and maintaining dangerous eye contact with me.

I threw my head back, and he attacked my neck with hot, sticky kisses, his teeth leaving deep, delicious tingles in their wake. My mind was at war once

again, fighting for my pride. Arthur was killing me, physically and mentally. My mind was getting fucked, as well as my body. Stars blinded my vision, and the world around me closed in.

Arthur clenched my jaw and titled my face to him. "Look at me when I'm touching you."

No.

He didn't have any control over—*oh, fuck.* His fingers curled and were tugging at my spot. I wanted to yell curses at him. I wanted to tell him how this forbidden experience was destroying me mentally. My efforts to express all of this were shattered once I opened my mouth to speak.

He removed the boxing wrap from my lips.

"I hate you."

Thrust.

"You fucking sick bastard."

Thrust.

"Oh, fuck, Arthur."

Thrust.

His lips planted against mine, washing my brain with waves of insanity. This was madness. How could he be so good at making my body react foolishly, even when I knew fully well I was compromising my morals by letting him touch me?

"You hate me, don't you?"

I nodded, clenching around his long fingers. "More than you know."

"Tell that to your pussy."

He withdrew his fingers from me, the strands of wetness connecting his fingertips to my entrance. With no hesitation, he stuck it inside my mouth. The sweetness from the tea I drank last night flooded my taste buds, and I sucked on his fingers, maintaining our locked gazes.

"Such a good girl," he muttered.

His words travelled to my brain and unlocked an idiotic part—a part that made me crave his praises once more. Why the fuck would I want to be praised by a criminal? Logically, Arthur belonged in a prison cell.

Shit.

He was planting subtle kisses on my inner thigh, his fingers digging deep into the skin of my ass. Watching him kneel before me, ready to worship, a cold thrill ran down my spine, and I arched my back, pushing my wetness closer to his face. His straight nose grazed my slick lips, a sucking sensation from within trying to drag his whole face inside me.

"Please," I begged.

This was fucking insane. I was begging Arthur Knight.

"*Please.*"

"Do you promise to be a good girl?" he asked against my skin, his hot breath spilling over my hood, tickling it.

I nodded.

"Use your words, Ms. Michaelson."

He slapped both my thighs, the burn more intoxicating than any drug in the world.

"*Yes.*" The word came out in a breathy moan.

"Splendid," he said.

He went down on me, licking up and down, my folds meshing together with the textured surface of his tongue. I wanted to hold his head and bury his face deeper. I wanted him deep in me. My whole body felt like a fucking pussy at this point. Each touch of his hand on my skin was enough to set ablaze an entire country.

He added his finger, the additional stimulation making me whine and arch my back further. Fucking hell. My body was hot, burning hotter with each passing second. I wanted to suck the whole world inside me. I needed to get rid of that fucking desire to get filled up by something, anything.

His face was against me, his stubble occasionally pricking me, but the pain did nothing but alleviate my sensations, making every movement of his touch more electrifying. I was closing in, my body feeling like I was lying on a light cloud and soaring the skies. At this moment, nothing mattered; only my fucking need to release, nothing else.

The torrent of satisfaction came, washing through me, my knees hitting together as I sucked his fingers in, wanting them buried in me forever. The ceiling lights glared at me, and my body trembled.

Weakness overtook my limbs. My body had become my enemy after I had satisfied it. A force lifted me, and I looked up to see Arthur. He held my body, his hard muscles sinking into my soft skin.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Aftercare." He exited the ring with me. "We have camera shopping to do. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can continue to more important matters."

I narrowed my eyes at him. Something was different this time. The last time we did something this silly, he told me to leave his office. Now, he was giving me aftercare. What the fuck was happening?

"Did you hit your head somewhere?" I asked as he hauled me down the stairs.

He narrowed his brows. "No."

We entered the living room. Jane and Harry watched us, but Jane looked more intensely at me. Did she suspect a thing? I closed my eyes, pretending to be weak.

"What happened to her?" Jane asked.

"We were doing some cardio, and she almost passed out," Arthur replied.

I blushed. I could only hope this would be the last time we would do something this foolish again.

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Chapter 23

ARTHUR

I had thought I would be used to Ms. Michaelson's tardiness by now. Apparently, I wasn't. I sat on my motorcycle, holding a helmet and watched the entrance of our apartment building. For a lady I was taking shopping, I expected her to be waiting for me on my motorcycle already.

After what felt like ages, she walked out, and my jaw fell. Thankfully, I was wearing my helmet, and she couldn't see my reaction. Her hair was tied into two pigtails and held by two butterfly clips. She sported a white shirt and a skirt that grazed above her upper thigh. My fingers throbbed to feel the softness of her skin once again. I gulped. What was happening to me?

This lady was a vixen. I shouldn't be having any silly thoughts about her. She was a reporter, and reporters would do anything to get their target to lower their guard. There was a high possibility that after this mission, she would write a story about me. I shouldn't get too involved with her, or else I might get hurt.

She smiled. Bloody hell. Her smile was spine-chilling, but still had the brightness to wash away the darkness within my soul. She was beautiful. She had always been beautiful.

"You're late," I said, handing over the helmet.

She took it. "I'm a lady, Arthur. You can't expect me to shower quickly and hop out of the room."

"Just get on the bike."

"I think we might have a little problem," she said, pursing her lips.

"What?"

"I'm scared of bikes."

"I thought American girls loved bad boys who rode bikes."

"That's just stereotypical of you, Arthur."

"Get on the bike, Ms. Michaelson."

She crossed her arms. "You don't get to order me around."

I held her by the waist and pulled her closer, our bodies inches apart. Her breath hitched, and she looked at my black visor, trying to find my eyes. At that moment, with all the people passing by, I wanted to claim every inch of her and remind her who called the shots here.

"Listen to me," I said, my voice low and more raspy than I expected. "Keep giving me more of this bloody attitude, and I'll have no other choice than to fuck some sense into you."

She gulped and shoved my hand away, a hint of a smile on her lips. When we first met at that cafe, I hadn't expected to develop this serial obsession with her. I mean, she had smelly feet. Now, I wouldn't mind sucking and worshipping those feet if it brought her pleasure.

"Geez," she said, mounting the bike and wrapping her hands around my waist. A ripple of excitement spread through my stomach, "you don't always have to get your way, you know?" She inhaled. "Please, just ride safely."

I smiled and started the engine, the revving sounds sending tickling vibrations through my body. We started our journey, and with each second that passed, I could feel her hold tightening. The fact that she was scared of bikes but trusted me to ride her safely sent a sharp tingle through my body.

Taking a sharp turn, I inhaled sharply. If I kept more of these thoughts in my head, I might end up doing what I had been fighting so hard against—feeling something. I always felt my responsibility was to protect whoever I had in my circle. This mentality was what stopped me from going on dates or letting anyone get too close. What if I couldn't protect them like my late ex? The thought nibbled incessantly in my mind.

What happened yesterday brought back so many memories, and with them came a sea of worry and fear. Knowing it could happen to Ms. Michealson caused my heart to ache.

"You know, I have a confession to make," she said.

"I'm listening."

"I kinda searched you on the net countless times after we met for the first time, and I couldn't find anything. There's no trace of you in this world. How does it feel to live a life like that?"

I ignored everything she said, focusing on the fact that she was obsessing over me.

"So, you were stalking me."

"Don't think so highly of yourself," she countered.

"I have no problem with you stalking me. I love the obsession; it turns me on."

Her heart raced faster against my back, and her hold around my stomach tightened.

"I'm not obsessed."

"Your body said otherwise this morning."

Silence stretched between us, and I could imagine her blushing hard under the helmet.

"You're annoying," she said.

Only for you.

Oh God. What was happening to me? *'Only for you'* What in the Queen's name was that? That was the last straw. I had to pull myself together till this day ended, and everything would go back to how it was.

Arriving at the electronic store, I offered her my hand and ensured she got off the bike safely. Then I went after her, my eyes alert for any impending danger. A chilly air, probably from the AC systems, hit me as we entered the store. Gadgets ranging from phones to laptops were displayed, with blue neon lights highlighting the white display tables they sat on.

The camera section was located further down, and Ms. Michaelson's pace quickened when she spotted it. Cameras of all sizes lined the aisle, and she watched them, her mouth ajar. It was adorable. She looked like a kid on their first visit to Disneyland.

A dark, skinny lad with full afro hair walked over to us, a smile on his face. His eyes widened when he saw Ms. Michealson, and my jaw muscles flexed. He had better strayed his silly eyes off her, or I would give his jaw a proper fixing.

"Hello, welcome to Hastings Electronics. How can I help you?"

"She needs a new camera," I said.

"Okay, we have the Canon camera or the Sony, just the usual classics."

While we were talking, Ms. Michaelson walked over to a camera and squatted to look at it. From the way her eyes lit, I knew she was amazed by that one in particular.

I pointed at the camera and asked the man, "How much for that one?"

"Oh, the Phase One XF IQ4 150MP," he said, joining her. "That's £50,000."

"Yikes," Ms. Michaelson muttered, rising with disappointment stamped on her face.

"I understand price may be a problem."

I raised my brow at the man. "When did I say that?"

"Arthur, that camera costs £50,000. I know you're a millionaire, but don't you think we should get something less pricey?" she asked.

"I'm a billionaire, Ms. Michaelson, not a millionaire." I pointed at the camera. "Do you like it?"

She glanced at it and nodded.

"Then we'll buy it."

She opened her mouth to speak, but I shook my head, indicating I wasn't taking no for an answer. It was the least I could do. Besides, it was my fault she got taken by those bandits. If I hadn't maltreated her that night, she wouldn't have left.

I handed the man my black Amex card, and he hurriedly took it with shaky hands. He was most likely being paid on commission, and with such a price, he was making a whole lot of cash.

Once we finished the order, Ms. Michaelson didn't hesitate to hang the camera around her neck with a cute pink strap she had asked me to buy earlier. For a lady who didn't want me to spend 50,000 pounds on a camera, she was quick to ease up and ask me to buy her anything she wanted. For some reason, I had no problem with spoiling her.

"Thank you so much," she said as I led her to an elevator, my hand on the small of her back.

"You don't have to thank me."

"Do you know how many common people like me have access to this sort of camera? Zero, that's the answer. Only movie studios buy cameras of this quality."

I pursed my lips and pressed the button on the elevator. "You're not common, Ms. Michaelson. Don't think so lowly of yourself."

"My, my, is that a compliment I smell?"

My chest panged at her heart-thawing smile. "I'm a gentleman. I admit when I've been bested, and you once detected a gig of mine back at the coffee shop. It takes someone knowledgeable and clever to catch a man as awesome as I am."

"You just can't praise me without praising yourself, can you?" she asked.

"What can I say? I'm Arthur Knight."

She did a facepalm, chuckling. "Oh God."

As much as I hated to admit it, I enjoyed her company. I hadn't felt this way in years. Happiness was a distant emotion for me, but with her, everything seemed easy. I could let my guard down, even if it were for a second, because she showed me that she could protect herself. She was smart enough to catch me at the cafe. She was smart enough to leave hints that helped me rescue her. But I didn't know if she was smart enough not to get too close to me. It wasn't safe for her.

"Now, onto the real thing," she said. "Where the fuck are you taking me?"

"It's a surprise."

"Now I'm anxious."

"What do you mean?"

"I hate when people tell me about a surprise. Now I want to know what it is."

The elevator pinged, and the door opened. We were on the top floor, where a helicopter sat on a helipad. We exited, and a pilot approached me and shook my hands.

"Happy flying, sir," he said, leaving.

Her lips parted. "Arthur, no you didn't."

"What is the matter?"

"Is this some 'Fifty Shades of Grey' type of shit?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I suppose."

"Yes!" she screamed, hopping excitedly. "I've always wanted to get into a helicopter!"

I chuckled, shaking my head at her excessive adorability. The fact that she was excited about everything I did for her made me want to spoil her even more. I

wanted to show her the world, even if it was for this brief moment of our mission together.

Holding her by the waist, I lifted her into the helicopter. She glanced at the controls, her eyes wide with excitement. I joined her and helped her put on her headphones before putting on mine.

"Why are you doing all this?" she asked, her gaze locked on me.

I concentrated on the controls, careful not to lock eyes with her to avoid revealing my true intentions. I felt guilty for putting her life in danger. This was my only way of feeling better about what I did—by giving her a good time.

"Yesterday was a disaster. I just want us to have a great time to put us all back into the right frame of mind," I said.

She shrugged. "If you say so." She lifted her arms. "Now, fly this motherfucker!"

"Language, Ms. Michaelson."

"Oh, please," she said, rolling her eyes.

I started the engine and pulled the collective. I couldn't wait to show her what I had in store for her. Hopefully, she would like it.

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Chapter 24

OCTAVIA

The view over London was far from what I had anticipated. Shafts of sunlight licked the buildings, donning them in its golden glow. I took tons of photos as we soared over the city, my heart racing so fast I could have a heart attack. This was one of the few times I had the chance to take pictures from such an incredible vantage point. Additional points were also given because of how excellent my camera was. The intricate designs of the London tower from the helicopter were as clear as a crystal.

However, despite everything I was so eager to capture, the beautiful face beside me didn't fail to call upon my camera. His long lashes batted as he expertly navigated us through the air, his eyes on the road ahead.

"You're staring too much, Ms. Michaelson," he said.

My cheeks burned. "I was just wondering how you got so good at flying a helicopter."

"My delicate occupation requires that I learn a lot of things."

"You mean being a thief."

He side-glanced at me. "I told you, I don't steal. I *take.* "

"Of course."

"Besides, I'm using the helicopter because I wanted you to have a better view to take your silly photos." He shrugged. "London is too big, and the only way to see all of it is from above."

My cheeks warmed up. I appreciated the gesture. Arthur Knight was indeed a gentleman. I raised my camera and took a picture of him. The angles were perfect. The way the sun hit his jaw was perfect. *He* was perfect. And it pissed me off! How could a man be so handsome but have such a detestable profession? And not only that. He was also smart enough to run a business of his own. I couldn't deny that despite his shortcomings, he still had a hold on me, which was unfathomable.

Keep your cool.

He's just a man.

We approached another helipad on a skyscraper's rooftop with tons of palm trees surrounding it. I didn't know London had palm trees; perhaps it was a design specific to this location? Arthur lowered the helicopter, and when the engines went off, he exited and helped me out of the aircraft, his hands latched onto my hips.

His gaze was scorching, burning my body and making me throb in places his eyes didn't move over. He let go of my hips, leaving my skin aching for his touch once more. Clearing my throat, I scanned the place. A pool was next to the helipad, surrounded by tropical flowers and towering palm trees casting their shades over the water. A glass house occupied the end of the pool, and two lounge chairs sat adjacent to it. The place was an artificial version of Florida's beaches, but it was still a breathtaking view.

"Wow, it's beautiful."

"You like it?" Arthur asked, his voice tinged with uncertainty. He scratched the back of his neck, and it was cute seeing him get all worked up trying to please me.

"I don't like it."

He pursed his lips, the disappointment forming a dark haze in his eyes.

"I love it," I said, grinning.

He rolled his eyes and picked me up with a swoop of his arm, my belly resting on his trap muscles as I giggled, kicking my feet in the air. After what happened yesterday, today was a sharp contrast and a breath of fresh air. And if this was what Arthur was trying to do—take my mind off last night—he was doing a good fucking job.

"Don't put me down."

His deep chuckle rippled through his body, splashing waves of warmth through my stomach. He settled me down on the big white bed in the glass house overlooking the pool and removed his white top. The curves and dips of his muscles cast deep shadows as the sun struck his porcelain skin. His gun holster clung tightly to his waist, a reminder that despite his beauty, he was still capable of danger. I didn't hesitate to take a picture of him.

"Are you getting source material for your nighttime escapades?" he asked, opening a drawer and taking out a book.

"You must be delusional if you think I touch myself thinking about you."

"Indeed," he said. "Perhaps I'm delusional in all matters concerning you, and frankly, it's disturbing."

"I don't know if that's a compliment or a jab at me."

"It's both." The door opened, and a pretty dark-skinned lady with braids walked in with a stretcher. Another lady with red hair and an overzealous smile joined her, holding a tray full of cocktails. "Ms. Michaelson, this is Tanisha and Joanne," he said, gesturing to the dark lady and the redhead, respectively. "They'll be treating you to a full spa day."

"Spa day?"

"Girl," Tanisha said, her American accent roping her voice as she dragged me off the bed. "We'll be giving you that five-star treatment you deserve."

Joanne handed me a cocktail. "Oh, you must give my drink a try. Everyone loves it."

Her smile made it even more convincing, and I took a sip. It wasn't bad. By the time I had looked at where Arthur once stood, he was already at the poolside, lounging in a far corner and reading a book.

"Your boyfriend told us you had a rough day yesterday and needed some fire massage," Tanisha said, helping me remove my clothes. I settled onto the massage bed and she covered me with a large white towel.

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Really?"

I nodded.

"Then you better hook me up."

I grinded my teeth. "He's not looking for a girlfriend."

Tanisha and Joanne exchanged glances before smiling at each other. Why were they smiling?! Arthur wasn't my boyfriend. We would most likely not work out. His life and mine didn't match. But the thought of him in the arms of another woman, like Tanisha or even Ms. Hannah burned my flesh.

Joanne held my cocktail for me as I sipped while lying down. Tanisha didn't waste any time and had already begun her work. Her fingers worked magic as she

kneaded my skin, letting the stress dissipate. My sore muscles began to loosen up as she applied more pressure, almost bringing sleep to my eyes. But I couldn't sleep. I couldn't sleep knowing that these two women were around Arthur and wouldn't hesitate to jump on that wagon if given a chance.

"Your plasters are cute," Joanne said, pointing to the plasters Arthur had applied yesterday.

"Thanks, he did it."

"Aww."

"What's so '*aww*' about it?" I asked, raising a brow.

"You got to be blind if you can't see that man is feeling you," Tanisha said. "I mean, helicopter rides, a full-on spa day, takes care of your wounds. Baby, *sign* me up."

"So you think he likes me?"

"Likes you? Girl, this man is long gone. He's obsessed at this point."

Joanne nodded in agreement.

"So you better claim him before some other lady does," Tanisha added.

I watched Arthur reclined in his seat, reading his book so innocently these ladies would never even suspect he had blood on his hands. *Claim him?* Why the fuck should I claim him? People like Arthur didn't value commitment. I had only had one boyfriend since high school, and since then, no man had ever stirred anything within me. That was until I met this idiot.

After an hour of laughter and some odd conversations which circled the idea of claiming Arthur as mine, the ladies left. I was glad they massaged my head as well. Unfortunately, that meant losing the pigtails I had done to look decent for him. Wrapped in a white robe and a cocktail in my hand, I joined him at the pool area, lying next to him on an empty lounge seat.

He didn't acknowledge my presence. We couldn't have that happen, could we? So, I decided to do the only thing any lady in my position would do. I extended my hand towards his face, showing him my newly polished nails. *Don't get the wrong idea*. I wasn't fishing for a compliment. I just wanted to get his attention.

His eyes narrowed at my hands. "Mauve? Splendid choice. It compliments your hair colour."

My jaws slacked. Could this man get any more perfect?! I mean, aside from the fact that he was a thief, he ticked all the other boxes.

"You know 'Mauve'?"

"My job requires me to learn things from all aspects of life."

I was about to remind him that stealing wasn't technically a job, but I held my tongue. The sun skimmed over his face, giving his skin a slight tan. I drummed my fingers on the armrest, trying to resist running my fingertips over his stubbled cheeks.

"So," I sipped from my cocktail, "about this job of yours; no one wakes up one morning and decides to do it. Why did you get into it?"

I was desperate to find a reason to excuse his only bad trait. Maybe then, this silly thing we had going on could have a future. *Maybe*.

"I didn't know our day off was going to be another interview," he said flatly, closing the book in his hands and twisting his waist to face me. "What's stopping you from writing a story about me if I tell you?"

"I mean, I took two punches in the face for you. I think that counts as something, right?"

"Very well."

I sat on the lounge, my back straightening as I watched him keenly, waiting to hear the genesis of his shortcomings.

"My parents died in a car accident, leaving behind a massive fortune to be inherited. My uncle found a loophole in the system, took over my father's company, and tossed me and my sister onto the streets."

"How's that possible? Isn't there a law that forbids that?"

"There is. However," he said, "my uncle had the London government in his hands. He was so powerful. I couldn't go to the police because I knew my sister and I would be tossed into foster care or, worse, even murdered. I didn't want that. So I hustled, made a few bad friends and decisions along the way, and voila, I'm here with you, lounging in the sun, enjoying the company of a very nosy American."

Shit, and I thought I had it bad. He spoke about his terrible past like it was something casual. I had interviewed so many people to know this was a mechanism used by humans to hide how truly hurt they were about a situation.

"So technically, you had no choice."

"We always have a choice, Ms. Michaelson." He shrugged. "I chose the best one for me and my sister. What about you? What's your story?"

"What do you mean, what's my story?"

"You just didn't wake up one morning and decide to go after a dangerous organisation, did you?"

"Of course not. How crazy do you actually think I am?"

He smirked. My heart thawed.

Focus, Octavia. Focus.

"My parents died in a plane crash. Some fucking official who was in charge of airplane maintenance laundered money meant for plane repairs. My parents' plane went into the air without proper maintenance, and they crashed. Since then—"

"You dedicated your life to fighting corruption." He nodded. "That's commendable."

"But you're the epitome of what I'm against."

"Yet you're drawn to me, aren't you, Ms. Michaelson?"

Gooseflesh spread on my skin, and my heart drummed like a rockstar was playing it in a concert.

"That's a bold assumption, Arthur," I said, gazing at the floor. I was so shy I couldn't even look this charming fucker in the eye

He laughed, his baritone resonating in my heart. Resting his cheek on the backrest of the lounge chair, he looked at me, his eyes softening.

"I'm sorry about your parents. They didn't deserve to die."

"Same. Maybe if our parents were alive, things would have been different."

"And we wouldn't have met."

That thought pricked me. The knowledge that somewhere in a universe which existed far away, we wouldn't have met tossed spikes of pain into my heart. Why was I feeling this way? My life would have been much better if I hadn't met him. Right?

Girl, don't ask me.

Well, it was a relief to know that even my fucking mind was too scared to answer that question.

"I'm sure things didn't go entirely bad for you. You went to school and grew up to be a successful but troublesome reporter who most likely had a decent enough love life."

I chuckled. "I've only had one boyfriend. High school."

"I would say I'm surprised, but not everyone can handle your level of crazy."

I rolled my eyes. "Sure, how about you? Handsome British *Billionaire.* Your love life must have been quite the roster."

Damn me for wanting to know how many women were before me. I needed to know who I was competing with. A man as good-looking as him probably dated models with waists so thin they could fit through a needle. I had a little more skin in my waist and hip area. God, I couldn't believe Arthur was making me question if I was pretty enough.

"Unfortunately, your assumptions are wrong," he replied. "I've only dated one woman in my life."

Oh, fuck. He had a soulmate, and that wasn't me. That wasn't a big deal. It wasn't like I had believed we belonged to each other.

"Wow, lucky lady. How's she?" I tried my best not to sound bothered, but my bitchiness was so extreme it slipped out.

"She's dead."

Oops.

My heart rate normalised, and it *definitely* wasn't because she was dead.

"What was her name?"

"Matilda. I had taken a man's car and sold it for quite a catch. But he was vengeful, and when he couldn't get my sister, he went for the part he knew would hurt most."

"Matilda."

He nodded, his eyes devoid of emotion. It was scary, hearing him talk about the death of his parents and his former lover like it was another day in the park. He must've mourned them for so long he couldn't cry anymore.

"That's really fucked up, Arthur. I'm sorry." I extended a hand, intertwining my fingers with his. "Is that why you wouldn't let me close? Why you wouldn't tell me about your scars?"

He gulped.

That was his answer. *Claim him.* Tanisha's advice echoed in my head. For years, I had never boldly chosen to go after what I wanted. I knew I wanted Arthur. I was only fighting it because a life with him wouldn't align with my morals. But did those morals protect me? Did those morals treat my wounds and always put me first?

For the first time in my life, I decided to say *'fuck this'* and go after what I truly wanted—Arthur. I left my lounge chair and picked up his gun from his holster before I mounted him.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his brows hitting each other.

I grazed the gun along his stubbles, and he froze.

"I have the gun, Arthur. I can protect myself. You have to accept that I can protect myself." I ran my thumb over his lips. "You have to let me in."

A flash of fear flickered in his eyes. It was genuine, unbridled fear that showed his concern for me. I knew he wanted me safe. I wanted him safe, too. He didn't have to hold that burden alone. His jaw muscles flexed, and he nodded. This was it. There was no going back, and I knew it.

I leaned in and kissed him.

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Chapter 25

OCTAVIA

Arthur was a hungry animal; his fingers roaming over my body, leaving aches in the places he had yet to touch. My body rolled, inching closer to him, wanting to feel more of his presence. He was here. I wasn't hallucinating. He was here, and he was mine.

His lips were torching me with a burst of fiery passion, his fingertips threading sparks of excitement over my skin. With eagerness, my robe was already at the edge of the pool, leaving my body naked and vulnerable to him. His hungry gaze roamed over me, and his fingers went to my breasts. A cold expression imprinted on my skin before he wrapped his lips around my nipple.

"Fuck," I muttered, placing the tip of his gun on his temple as he wrung the air out of me with each second he spent sucking like his life depended on it. My let-down hair grazed my spine as I titled my head back, enjoying the scintillating feeling he was pouring inside me.

But the ache for him grew. It was a like a black hole, wanting to suck everything in and consume so much of him till I imploded like a fucking star. I wanted to see stars when he visited me. I wanted all of him at this moment. I wasn't going to hold back.

His growing excitement skimmed over my slickness whenever I rolled my hips. The barrier his briefs created between us was pissing me off. I hissed. I wanted his raw, unclothed hardness. Every inch of it made me pulsate between my legs, and I needed the flames within me to be doused. With impatience brimming in me, I dragged down his briefs with a hand, and he assisted, tossing it where my robe was.

The curve of his cock slapped against my stomach. Trends of fear and excitement ran through me. His thick head was dripping with precum, running over the ridges the veins of his hardness formed. I wrapped a hand around him and couldn't even get the entire circumference. Biting my lower lip, we locked

eyes. Impatience imploded like fireworks in his sky-blue gaze. He wanted this as much as I did.

"I don't have a condom," he said.

"I have pills back at the apartment."

I didn't hesitate to take him all in, a squelching sound rippling between us. God, he was big. His entirety lodged in me, and I adjusted forward, feeling him shudder.

"Be a good boy and move your hips for me," I said, running the tip of the gun over his lips. The idea that it was most likely loaded made me burn hotter. It was a risky game—all the more reason to be excited.

"I'm not a boy, Ms. Michaelson. You don't order me around; I'm a man."

"*My* man. In this moment, you're mine," I said, biting his ear.

"Don't ask for what you can't handle."

I buried the gun in his mouth and watched his eyes roll as he let out a gentle moan. He was such a good boy for me, and I would reward him. I would give him a chance to take control. That was, if he was up to the task.

"I have the gun, Arthur. Fuck me till I can't hold it anymore. If you like control so much, take it from me," I dared.

His fingers sunk into my love handles, their nerve endings triggering my mind in a spiral toss. He moved, sliding up and down as I carefully ensured not to pull the gun's trigger. Blank after blank visited my vision with each upward thrust. The sound of flesh meeting flesh filled the air.

The curve of his hardness grazed past my sweet spot, spewing flames of lust up my stomach, my body a mess to his actions. My hips rolled, joining him and wanting more of this naughty dance we both performed at the rooftop where people in surrounding skyscrapers could see. The thought of being watched while I claimed him as much as he claimed me floated me to a space where I felt weightless, the world around me dissociating into a blur.

He pounded fiercely, his defined legs sinking into my ass, making them sore. Sweat trickled down his neck, and I bent to lick it, enjoying the way his legs quivered at my action. I loved having an effect on him.

But he wasn't stopping. His pace dangerously increased, my hold on the gun growing weaker and weaker until it fell off my hand. In the blink of an eye, he

had me on all fours, my head over the rooftop. One silly mistake, and we would both be falling off this place.

"Fuck, Arthur, this is risky."

"When has that ever stopped me?"

He entered once again, each thrust of his hips pushing my head closer to the building's edge. Pistoning waves of satisfaction swam through me in accord with the sweeping motion of his hips, his hands fisting my hair as he slammed me harder into the lounge chair.

"God, you're pulling me in," Arthur groaned, his hand landing a well-deserved slap on my ass. I whined, my tongue stuck out as I threw my ass back, the feel of my skin on his hard muscles clouding my mind with a haze of lust.

He stuck three fingers in my mouth as he pulled my hair, their roots burning my scalp. God, I needed this. I needed some release after all this pent-up frustration and desire.

"Look at you," he said, spanking me. "All wanton with desire, your spit drooling over my fingers."

Yes, keep talking, Arthur. Keep fucking talking.

That sexy British accent was bringing me to my knees. I was being fucked by the proper gentleman.

"In the streets," *thrust,* "I'll treat you like," *thrust,* "my lady. But when we're alone all sweaty and sticky," *thrust,* "you're my slut."

"I love when you talk dirty," I said, letting out a throaty chuckle. "All those filthy words coming out of that pretty posh mouth."

Arthur groaned, his thrusts more upward, slamming into my spot. I was sucking him in like a vacuum, my wetness slipping down my inner thighs as our bodies made slick, wet noises once they came in contact with each other.

"God, you're perfect."

"Keep talking."

"I can't get enough of your wanton body throwing itself at me, wanting more." He caressed my breasts, his fingers like flames licking my skin. "From now on, this beautiful body of yours is *mine*. All mine."

My knees locked together, my release dripping down my groin as I struggled to find the balance between reality and the blank-white world I had just visited.

Arthur pumped five more thrusts, burying himself in me as our juices mixed. He kissed my shoulder and slipped out, lifting me from the lounge chair with a hand on my back and another behind my thighs.

My eyes were dizzy, and I could barely breathe.

"Fuck, you're dripping all over my arms," he groaned. "You're dripping with my claim over you. You're mine now."

I held his stubbled cheeks and kissed him, a soft smile on my face.

"I'm yours, Arthur."

He laid me gently on the bed and placed a kiss on my forehead. "Let's get you cleaned up."

***

Fear trembled through my fingers. They were right before me, the mystery he had kept hidden—the scars on his back. I wanted to trail my fingers over them and know why he was so bent on keeping it a secret.

"Ms. Michaelson," he said, his back still facing me in bed. The beams of sunlight hit his porcelain skin, the image like fire on snow. "I can feel your eyes on my back."

I gulped. "Good morning to you, too."

The bed rustled as he turned to me. His black hair was a tousled mess, and I wanted to rake my hands through it. Memories of how we'd fucked non-stop all night flooded back. But that wasn't my main concern.

I needed to know about those scars. The mystery of them was an unscratchable itch in my mind. He exited the bed, his ass jiggling as he covered the distance between him and his wardrobe. He fished out a white robe and wrapped it around his body before making his way to the telephone by the side of the bed. He made a call, and soon, breakfast was rolled in for us.

We sat in bed and ate, and occasionally, I would steal a glance at his handsome face. He looked brighter this morning. His cheeks, especially, were full of blood, and he had that *glow* women usually had after an incredible night of sex. My heart somersaulted. It was good to know I drained every ounce of his sanity last night.

"You keep staring at me, Ms. Michaelson," he said.

I slowly sucked on a strawberry, and he inhaled sharply. "I'm curious."

"About what?"

"What's the best thing you've ever stolen?"

He wet his lower lips, his oceanic gaze stirring with an unbridled torrent of emotions. Locking eyes, he said with a ghost of a smile, "I'm beginning to think I haven't stolen it yet."

A strong flush consumed me. It might be ridiculous to assume that he was talking about me. Maybe I wanted him to be referring to me. But like any thief, he could be genuinely referring to an item he wanted to steal. Something that wasn't me.

He glanced at a clock on the wall. "Well, we better get ready to go back to the apartment. I believe our brief vacation is over."

My chest tightened. I had so much fun yesterday that I forgot we had a mission to complete. It would be completely hypocritical to say at this point, but I think I was enjoying Arthur's company way more than I had anticipated.

"Well, if these are our last hours in this place, why don't we make the most of it?" I asked, smirking.

He raised a brow. "What do you have in mind?"

"Shower sex."

He chuckled. "You're serious?"

"Mhm."

"Well, if that's your definition of fun," he said, lifting me from the bed. I laughed, kicking my feet as he led us to the bathroom. "I wouldn't mind indulging in your silly desires."

Our bodies collided the moment he settled me under the running shower. Water dripped down my face as I struggled to breathe while kissing him. Water flooded into my mouth, his lips moist and soft. My hair stuck to my skin, the droplets of water leaving trickling sensations as they travelled down my spine.

I held his springing cock, running my hand back and forth his length, the splashing water drowning our moans. He was persistent with his tongue, burying himself in my mouth as my mind fought to find a balance between my sanity and the unfiltered longing for him.

"I have an idea," I said, sticking him between my thighs and jamming them close.

He moaned. "You fucking temptress."

"Kiss me," I begged.

He attended to my request, thrusting his hardness through my thighs, the water splashing between our skins. The limbs of his body fought to be steady as he tightened his grip on my hip dips. Lust spread through me like a virus, my insides throbbing and wishing for a filling experience.

"God, you feel so soft and—" he moaned, his back bunching as I closed my legs tightly, the friction burning my skin. An involuntary moan left my lips once his mouth departed mine, the breathlessness and longing growing incessantly, "Fuck, you'll be the death of me."

I joined him in his hip thrusts, our bodies slapping together. My thighs burned. They burned so bad, but the cool of the water kept repairing the feeling. Arthur's knees buckled, and his legs trembled. His explosion brought great satisfaction to me.

We took a step away, our eyes steeled with resolve. Our breaths mingled, and Arthur placed a hand on his chest, his breathing ragged. My eyes widened. Was he having a heart attack?

"My heart explodes when you look at me like that. You're beautiful, Octavia," he grabbed a handful of my wet hair and kissed me, "and I would be a fool if I didn't remind you of it every day."

Octavia. This was the first time he'd ever called me by my first name. My heart fluttered with joy, and it took all my resolve not to run into his arms and give him a big, long-lasting hug. Oh, and he called me beautiful, too. *Thank you, Tanisha!*

I bit back a smile. "You called me by my first name."

"I believe we're way past formalities now," he said, panting and pointing at the bathtub. "*Sit*."

My bones froze at his command, but I obeyed, sitting on the cold surface. A piercing chill ran up my spine. Kneeling before me, he picked up a hand-held showerhead and turned it on. Before I could process what was going on, the

pressure from the water hit me, pummeling so much pressure no amount of dick could bring. Arthur smiled, knowing he had me in his control.

I arched my back, trying to adjust to this new-found feeling, and he buried searing kisses over my neck. The combined sensation came together like rain and storm, crashing within me and causing an implosion I couldn't fight. From there on, it was orgasm after orgasm until I couldn't feel my toes anymore. By the time we were on our way home in his helicopter, uneasiness pooled in my stomach.

I knew once we got back to the apartment, his sister wouldn't be too happy. I could handle this, right?

Girl, you're dead.

I fucked her brother. I had signed my death wish.

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Chapter 26

OCTAVIA

When we stepped back into the apartment, Jane's face was twisted with hate. I couldn't understand exactly why she hated me. I knew sisters were protective of their brother, and no matter how hard I tried to understand her reason for despising me, I kept falling into an endless pit of non-acceptance.

She had stolen me from Arthur, and we were at the rooftop at the apartment, sitting on a sofa that overlooked the city. I didn't even realize they had a rooftop here. The sun was dipping below the horizon, hues of orange and black streaking the sky. I drummed my fingers on the seat, my back as straight and cold as a steel rod on a winter morning.

Jane crossed a leg over the other and stared at the dipping sun. "How was your little fun vacation?"

"It wasn't exactly a vacation per se. We just chilled."

"I know you fucked my brother."

My brows lifted, a spark of surprise hitting me like a lightning bolt. Was it my face? Was I smiling too much? What gave it away? Shit, shit, shit. This girl had guns as toys. She could end me right here.

"Arthur is my brother."

I nodded. "That I know of."

"And he has been through a lot. There's a reason he hasn't fucked any lady since his ex until you came."

I chuckled. "You're joking. There's no way a man like him hasn't had a—"

"I'm not joking."

A warmth spread through my chest. I couldn't believe this.

"Wow, I didn't know."

"Look," Jane said, twisting her waist so we could face each other, "Arthur blamed himself so badly for the death of his ex that he wouldn't even sleep with

his clients anymore. Now he fucks you, which simply states he thinks you're special to him."

I smile.

"But I don't want that." My smile dropped. "If something were to happen to you, he would be a mess. And you wouldn't be here to clean it."

"You do realise you won't marry your brother, right?" I challenged.

She could break me like a twig, but I wouldn't give up on something I just started to feel—love. I wouldn't want to lose it so easily to a scary British lady who loved violence as much as the next serial killer.

Jane chuckled, and a white sheen of danger sliced her blue gaze. "This game you want to play, I'd advise you don't. You'll only leave both of you feeling hurt. Leave while you can."

"You'll have to kill me first."

A knife appeared at my throat as quick as an eye blink, and I gulped. "Trust me, I have no problem doing that."

"If I go down, Jane, you go down with me." I smirked.

I was smirking when a knife was at my neck?! Where did this foolish bravery come from?! I guess being with Arthur brought out my wild side, the monster within that was waiting to be unleashed.

Jane's jaw muscles flexed, and she released the knife, saying, "You passed."

My jaw dropped. Was this all a fucking test?

"What did I pass?" I asked, rubbing my sore neck.

"I needed to see how far you would go for him," she said, standing and extending her hand. I stood and shook it. "Turns out you're just as crazy as I am in protecting him."

I smiled. Even if Jane initially disliked me, I saw this as a great compliment. Today was a good day, and nothing was going to ruin it. Footsteps approached, and we both turned our heads toward the rooftop door. Arthur and Harry stood side by side, severe expressions on their faces.

"There's been an update on the mission," Arthur said, leaning on the doorframe. "And Harry here thinks we all need to hear it."

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Chapter 27

ARTHUR

I was curious as well to know what Harry had to say. He had interrupted my daydreaming session earlier, which involved Octavia and me doing the most unholy things I could ever think of. Ever since our outing yesterday, I couldn't get her out of my damn mind. She was here to stay in my heart, and I had to learn to accept that simple fact.

Harry led us to the dining table, and everyone sat, anticipating his words. Octavia and I glanced at each other, and my neck tingled, remembering how we fucked all night long yesterday. I smiled. She was such a good girl, and I loved it.

"Now I know you're all wondering what I have to say," Harry began, sitting at the head of the table and crossing his arms. "Trust me, whatever you think it is, it's way worse than that."

Harry having something serious to say? That was a first. My heart beat increased as I searched my mind for the worst possible scenario that could play out. Was McCarthy alive? No, that couldn't happen. I burnt him to a crisp. I made sure of that and buried him myself.

"Arthur, I did my research on McCarthy's financial report as you had asked and reached out to some of my friends in Parliament to help me trace the flow of his money," Harry started. "Now, it turns out this money wasn't the first of its kind. There's been an intricate channel used to ensure that it went by unnoticed. Shell Companies. These people set up various shell companies to receive funds from corrupt government officials. They act as intermediaries to further distance the money from its source."

"But how does the money leave the shell company?" I asked.

"Now, here's the interesting part. The shell companies transfer the funds to a fake investment bank. The investment bank, as a front, fabricates investments and transactions to legitimise the funds."

So technically, these people ran the money through the most legitimate way they could think of. It was *actually* brilliant. Kudos to them. I was rather impressed. Considering I owned an investment company, it was pretty surprising that I hadn't thought of this beautiful money laundering pattern.

"Now, this fake investment bank invests the laundered funds into a commercial bank. These banks use the laundered money to buy valuable assets such as real estate and company shares owned by corrupt government officials."

"And the government officials now receive the laundered money through the sale of the asset, making it appear as if the funds came from a legitimate transaction," I concluded. "I have to say, I didn't think McCarthy would be smart enough to pull a move like this."

Harry's gaze intensified. *Uh oh.* "That's the thing. McCarthy didn't run this. The person who did this was so smart and powerful that the members of Parliament are at his fingertips like puppies on strings. The only reason I was given all this information was because they want him gone." Harry raised a finger. "This person is so powerful and dangerous that when they commissioned their tower, and the builders complained about how bad the work condition was, he killed them and their wives, leaving their kids without parents."

"Who could be so powerful to pull something like this?" Octavia asked.

"The current owner and CEO of Knight group." Harry exchanged glances with me and my sister. "Your uncle, Jonathan Knight."

Jane ran her hand through her hair. "Fuck."

My jaws flexed so hard they ached. I had thought I would never have a reason to interact with that man again, but here I was, slapped in the face that no matter how hard I tried, he would always be ahead of me. I wouldn't have thought much of this situation if history wasn't repeating itself before me. He was making those children all alone in the world, just like he did when he chased my sister and me into the streets. He was so powerful we couldn't even go to the police for fear of being murdered.

Whip!

The memory visited once again like a crashing storm. Jonathan Knight had chased my sister through the massive mansion because she had dared to answer him

rudely. I had intervened, wanting to protect her, and he asked only one thing—that I took the belt for her. I was whipped for the stubbornness of my sister.

Whip!

I flinched.

Whip!

Sweat trickled down my back.

Whip!

"Arthur."

"Arthur?"

Whip!

"Arthur!"

A hand settled on my shoulder, bringing me back to consciousness. Octavia stared deep into my eyes, her gaze brimming with a pool of concern. Fuck, I had blacked out and was sweating like I ran a bloody marathon. She settled next to me.

"Arthur, are you okay?" She massaged my delts. "You're sweating like crazy."

"Shit!" Jane's scream tore through the room as she kicked against the television in the living room multiple times. Her eyes were raging with the anger of a million souls who had lived the life of agony we once lived in the streets of London. Usually, I would stop her, but this time, I wouldn't. She deserved to let out that rage. Our uncle had found a way to creep back into our lives after years of leaving him behind and going our way. I had kept an eye on him by buying majority shares of Knight Group with my investment company, remaining anonymous, of course. But I had no idea he was the devil himself.

It all made sense now. I knew I had seen someone who looked like him during our escape from McCarthy's mansion. We were speeding through, so I didn't have the chance to decipher if it was him.

My sister walked up to me and slammed her hand on the table, watching me with a murderous gaze. "I'm going to kill that fucker."

"You will, sister. I promise you, you will."

"How can you be so calm after all this?" she asked me, disbelief lacing her tone.

"Because I want him dead as much as you do," I said, sliding my pistol into her hand. "But first, we need to talk with him."

"When?"

Harry joined in, "He's having a reveal party for his tower tomorrow. It'll be a great time to meet him."

"Good," Jane stormed out, her gait similar to a hungry lion, "I'll need to get my rest. I have a man to kill tomorrow."

"Would she really kill him?" Octavia asked. "I mean, we need to get our hands on whatever your uncle is using to control the funds."

"I'll deal with Jane when the time comes," I replied, standing. "You should get some rest."

"Where are you going?"

"To get some air."

***

I reclined on the sofa atop our apartment's rooftop and watched the starry night. I had stayed up all day, unable to process the news. My uncle was a monster. How did he always find a way to torture me from miles away? Cold wrapped its evil claws around me, and I massaged my elbows, the chill travelling further down my spine.

Soft footsteps sounded behind me. "Hey."

"Hello, you," I said, my eyes following Octavia as she came into full view.

She held a blanket and spread it out. "Care if I join you? You look like you need some warmth."

I hesitated. I had climbed here because I needed some time alone. But no alone time was worth more than her company. Coming to this decision, I gave a curt nod, and she joined me, wrapping the blanket around the both of us. She inched closer to provide enough body heat to keep me warm.

My heart jumped; her skin on mine like a moth to a flame. I couldn't get enough of the feeling. She rested her head on my shoulder, and we watched the full moon together. This was the perfect evening with her snuggled next to me like an angel sent by God to heal me of my scars.

"I'm guessing this uncle of yours has something to do with those scars."

I tensed, my shoulders frozen. "Why do you have to be so bloody smart?"

"You wouldn't speak with me if I wasn't smart."

"You're right. I do have a thing for smart women."

She scrunched her nose and glanced at me. "It's a good day to be Ada Lovelace, then."

I chuckled. "I guess so."

Silence stretched between us. I enjoyed it. Only our breaths and the honking of cars in the London streets licked the air. She wrapped her arms around my elbow.

"The scars," she started.

Telling her about this would mean opening up a part of me I had kept locked up for years. The lashes were a reminder of how dark the world was. My breath came out ragged. I was only ten. I was only a child who knew nothing, and my uncle took advantage of that. I was only trying to protect my sister.

I rubbed my thumb over her hand. "My uncle loved his belt."

"Fuck, Arthur," she said, turning to look up at me, her eyes widening with fear, "he did that to you?"

I nodded. "Before he kicked us out to the streets, my sister would rebel against him after our parents died, and whenever he wanted to beat her, I would tell him to flog me instead."

A tear ran down Octavia's cheek, and I wiped it with my thumb and kissed her hand.

"Don't cry for me, love. I turned out fine."

"But no one deserves that."

"I know," I said. "That's why I'll bring him down. For good this time."

She extended her neck and kissed me. It was soft. There was no feeling of lust or passion, just nature's healing touch. She was the moon to my night. I held her cheeks and returned her kiss. Her fingers left sparks of pleasure as they grazed my skin. My body burned hotter than a fucking inferno.

Under the warm blanket, our bodies meshed, the temperature so high sweat dripped down my neck, leaving tickling fantasies down my spine. I had explored her body long enough to know how to take off her skirt with ease.

"You're always ready for me," I muttered against her lips, her wetness dripping over my fingers as I slid over her drenched lips.

She bit my lower lip, her eyes darkening with lust. "Have you seen yourself?"

I slipped past her walls, feeling little spikes of hair against my skin. It was a bitter-sweet feeling, and I thrust faster, eager to feel it over and over again. She clenched, pulling me in like a vacuum, and I didn't mind drowning in her forever.

Our lips connected once more, our tongues fighting for control. My mind went blank with a sheen of passion. Her sultry lips were dripping with honey, and I wanted to lick every essence of it and relish in her little moans as I pounded her into the sofa.

The sofa creaked continuously, and my chest swelled with pride, knowing my strokes were powerful enough. A cold wind licked my skin, and I wrapped my hand around her neck, and she stuck out her tongue.

"Fuck, I love when you stick out your tongue," I said. "You look perfect. So fucking perfect, even the moon is jealous of how you look tonight."

Her eyes rolled, and she circled her hips, our bodies slapping continuously. My balls strained, and I could feel my release coming, but I couldn't go just yet till she came. I lifted my hips higher, slamming into her like a jackhammer, causing the couch to slide across the ground. With each stroke, the blanket rolled and rolled till it was off our bodies, my bare ass being licked by the chilly air.

She threw her head back, her pretty neck out for show, and I licked the deep lines her neck muscles formed, her body shuddering. She was salty and tasted like mine. Fuck, every inch of her was mine. I was going to fuck every inch of her till the only word she remembered was my name.

"Arthur, I think the sofa is going to break," she said, running her fingers down my chest.

"Let it break."

I slammed into her once more, and the sofa divided into two, our bodies sinking into the middle, her legs higher in the air. The tension grew hotter. I couldn't stop now. I wrapped her legs around my neck and kissed her ankles, my hips sore from all the contact. But I endured the pain, enjoying the delicious mix I got when it combined with the pleasure I derived from slipping in and out of her like my life depended on it.

"Arthur."

She sucked me in, her juices dripping onto my straining balls. But I didn't stop. I hammered into her as her legs vibrated around my body.

"Say the only name you remember," I commanded, kissing her chin.

Thrust.

"Say it."

Thrust.

"Arthur!" she screamed, her eyes at the back of her head as she exploded one more time.

I slipped out of her, my cum dripping all over my feet. God, she drained me. I kissed her forehead and dressed both of us before I carried her and took her back to her room. I could tell this time I broke her body. But I knew she didn't mind because she beckoned me and tapped the side of her bed.

"Can you please lay next to me tonight?"

"I don't think that's an excellent idea."

"Please."

I glanced at her room door and looked back at her. She was adorable and was in dire need of a good cuddle. And I would do anything to make her happy. Smiling, I joined her in bed, and she wasted no time to cuddle with me, her chest resting against mine.

If only this were my life forever. But I knew that when tomorrow reached, I would be forced to face reality. We both had a mission, and by the end of it, we would have to say our goodbyes.

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Chapter 28

OCTAVIA

After a morning of endless rounds of sex, Arthur and I joined the rest of the crew for breakfast and from the looks in everyone's eyes, I could tell they had already come to terms with it. Harry especially would occasionally glance between Arthur and me with a smug smile.

"Arthur, I thought you didn't like Americans," he teased, drinking from his cup of steaming tea.

"Shut up, Harry; we have important things to do."

"Yeah, you were doing important things this morning, alright."

Jane added, "The walls of this apartment aren't exactly thick."

"Just dial it down next time, please." Harry placed his hands together. "I was reading my Bible this morning, and all I could hear were words that would make even the devil shake his head in disbelief."

My cheeks burnt, and I glanced at Arthur. His face was blank. I could tell he wasn't used to this particular sort of banter. A laugh erupted from my chest, and he gave me a look that meant, *You're meant to be on my side.*

Rolling his eyes, he brought a sheet of paper from his trousers and settled it on the table. Everyone scooted closer to see what he had. It was a layout that looked like a blueprint for a building.

"This is a reveal party for the tower," Arthur started. "So there's a likelihood that he would have security around. I managed to get us tickets."

"Please tell me there would be drinks at this place," Harry said.

Jane rolled her eyes. "It's a party, Harry. Of course, there would be drinks."

"Jesus, chill, I just wanted a little confirmation, that's all."

"If you two are done with your bickering, we will move to the next phase of this discussion," Arthur said.

He continued talking and briefed us all on what to do. It was mostly about escape plans if shit hit the fan. But the part of the plan I loved the most was

when he said I would be by his side all night.

By noon, we were all ready and dressed up to go, with Harry being the driver as usual. Arthur's eyes occasionally raked over my outfit—it was a black body-hugging gown that had a thigh slit—and his gaze stripped me naked.

He leaned over, and my neck flared with heat. "You look magnificent in that dress."

"Thank you."

"I can't wait to rip it off when we get back."

My eyes widened, and I shoved him with a smile. "Arthur!"

He winked at me and focused his attention outside the car window. His jaw muscles flexed, and I could decipher that he was thinking about his uncle. What that bastard did to him was more than inhumane, and what he was doing to other children was far worse. I rubbed my knuckles and tightened my fist till my palms grew sore. If only I had the guts to murder someone, I wouldn't hesitate to drive a bullet through Jonathan Knight's brain.

"I still don't know why you won't let me carry a gun," Jane said, glancing at her brother through the rearview mirror.

Arthur sighed. "There would be a security check at the entrance."

"So how would we defend ourselves if our dear old uncle finally decides to kill us off?"

"We wouldn't need to defend ourselves because we won't reveal ourselves as his nephew and niece."

Jane's brows knitted. "So what is the entire purpose of this thing?"

"I need to see how far he's willing to go for the association."

"How?"

"By having a friendly chat, asking him to stop the laundering of funds."

My eyes widened. *Arthur* wanted to stop money laundering. Where did this sudden change come from? Did his uncle appearing back in his life change his priorities? His gaze was emotionless. He was holding in his rage. Maybe it was his way of dealing with trauma. I didn't like seeing him like this. If there was anything I could do to ease his pain, I wouldn't hesitate to do it.

"We're here," Harry announced. "Knight Towers."

The building had an architectural structure similar to the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The only difference was that it wasn't leaning, and it had circles of blue neon lights going over it. Luxury cars were parked outside, and there was a red carpet where celebrities took their photos.

Everyone left the car except Harry, who had to find a good parking space. We checked in and entered. The structure was a circular hall with railed balconies that ran the entire length of the building. At the top of the building, stars danced, and there was a galaxy display. People gasped while taking photos of it.

"Excuse me, I need a drink," Jane said and went to the bar. Her hands were shaking, and reporting for years had taught me different physical cues. Jane, right now, was looking like a woman who wouldn't mind driving a knife through someone's heart.

I needed to keep her in check. Arthur didn't want her to kill his uncle. Tapping his shoulder, I left him and joined his sister at the bar. She gave me a menacing glare before sliding a cocktail to me.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Um, to talk."

"You're trying to keep an eye on me, aren't you?"

I gulped. "Of course not."

"Oh, please. I've been stealing from people for years. I can read facial expressions."

"And what is mine saying right now?"

"That you're scared of getting punched in the face."

I sipped from my cocktail. "There may be some ounce of truth in that."

"Don't you worry, I'm not about to ruin Arthur's plan. I may be a maniac, but I'm not stupid."

We locked eyes and smiled at each other. "Well, that's good to know. You know, you're not so bad. We could be friends."

"Don't push your luck," she said. "I'm keeping an eye on you too."

And we were back to square one. It was stupid to think I could bond with Jane. I mean, I was fucking her brother. No twin sister would feel entirely comfortable with that, especially for a stranger who came into their life just some weeks ago.

Harry joined Arthur who was leaning on a pillar, looking dapper in an all-black suit—his signature attire. They were having a conversation that wasn't quite audible since they were far away. The hair at the back of my neck stood up when I spotted a very familiar bitch walking in their direction. The one and only Ms. Hannah. Her golden hair tumbled effortlessly over her shoulders as she moved gracefully in the golden gown she wore that swept the floor.

Jane and I left the bar in accord with one intention in mind—keeping that temptress as far as possible from Arthur. Just when I thought she was about to greet Arthur, she changed her trajectory to me, a shockingly warm smile on her face. Fuck, if someone weren't trained enough in human expressions, they wouldn't see the demonic intention behind that sweet smile.

"Ms. Michaelson, it's been a while," she hugged me without my permission, forcing a piece of paper into my hand. I wanted to open it but instead slipped it inside my purse while everyone was so focused on her. She winked at me, and a shudder ran down my skin. What was that all about?

"Ms. Hannah," Arthur said flatly.

"Ah, my sweet dear Mathew," she said, her gaze darting to and fro between me and Arthur. "Mr Knight would like to see you two."

"What do you mean, 'you two'?" Jane protested.

Arthur backed Ms. Hannah, a stern gaze on his face as he locked eyes with his sister. She rolled her eyes and said, "Fine. Harry, you're with me."

Harry yelped as she dragged him towards the bar. "Arthur, we'll be here. I'm just gonna grab a quick drink with your sister."

Arthur gave him a curt nod, and Ms. Hannah gestured at us with a finger, still looking seductively at him with her siren gaze. My jaws grew sore from the excessive grinding of my teeth. It took all my courage not to lash out at this moment. My breathing grew heavy as we trailed behind Ms. Hannah, the crazy lady leading us to what could be our death sentence.

A calm river streamed through me once Arthur locked his hand with mine. It was a gesture that meant one single sentence: *We're in this together.*

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Chapter 29

ARTHUR

Only one thought spread through my mind. The thought of what this meeting would bring forth. What would my uncle be like? Would he still speak like the monster I knew him to be? Would he succumb to my request and seize his operations? I highly doubted that would be possible. He must have invested a lot into this secret association of his, and it would take a lot to get him to give it up.

The white-walled corridor we walked on greeted me with the continuous echo of my feet falls, the clacks of my oxfords in rhythm with my heartbeat. I held tightly onto Octavia, with no intention of letting her go in this crucial moment. Her touch was like the surface of silk, wrapping around me gently and keeping my sanity clothed.

We continued walking until we reached a door heavily guarded by two men in suits, assault rifles hanging from their shoulders. One had their gun dropping from their left shoulder, while the other was from the right shoulder. So, they were right-handed and left-handed, respectively. Noted. I would keep that in mind if I had to fight them to escape.

One of the men opened the door, and we were ushered into a room. The walls were paneled with wood, and a fireplace was in a corner. A dark silhouette sat next to it. Yellow light from the flames licked the golden signet ring on his hand. That was my family's ring. I couldn't believe it. After all these years, I was again in the same room with my uncle, alive and well.

Octavia tightened her hold on my hands, and we connected our gazes. She was reassuring me. However, the rage burning within me was so hot all I could think about was driving a bullet through his head. I had tried to remain calm all these while because of my sister. If I had lost it when Harry dropped the bomb, my uncle would be lying in a pool of blood right now. But I didn't want him dead yet. I had a job to complete, and that was what I would do.

"Mr Knight, they're here," Ms. Hannah announced, rounding a long table in the middle of the room that was sided with wooden chairs.

The chair turned, and my heart froze. It was the bastard in the flesh—black hair, dark, devilish eyes, aging lines, and an all-black suit. Jonathan Knight. He stood from the seat and sat at the head of the table, with Ms. Hannah joining him. A smile stretched across his lips, and the lines at the corner of his eyes crinkled.

"So, you are the two fellows who have been a thorn in my bloody backside." He narrowed his eyes as he watched me. "You look very familiar."

"Everyone tells me that."

Jonathan laughed dryly and glanced at Ms. Hannah. "You didn't tell me he was funny."

Her siren eyes ran over me, a bitter taste flooding my tongue. "He's a lot of things."

"Ah, yes," Jonathan said, snapping his fingers. "Please sit."

Octavia and I sat at the other end, our hands still locked together under the table. Ms. Hannah's gaze hardened, and I could see the jealousy burning like an inferno in her eyes. I didn't care. I didn't do older women anyway—especially witches like her.

"So Ms. Michaelson, Hannah here tells me you're a very talented reporter."

"That you tried to kill," Octavia shot back.

I smirked. *That's my girl.*

Jonathan waved off her comment. "That was entirely McCarthy, I promise you. A woman like you deserves to be given a real opportunity." He locked his hands together. "How about you leave Mathew here and join my side? I can make you editor-in-chief of whatever news company you wish."

"Go fuck yourself."

"That's quite bold, Ms. Michaelson."

"If you genuinely believe I would leave him for you, you've got another thing coming."

"Ah, I see." He clicked his tongue. "Bonnie and Clyde."

I had decided it was time I spoke and shut him up. His accent, although similar to mine, still sounded quite annoying.

"Now, I'm going to say this, and I would say it only once, Jonathan." His eyes widened for a nanosecond at the mention of his name. I leaned forward, my gaze locked on him like he was my prey. "Stop your money laundering operation, pay a million dollars to each of the kids whose parents you murdered, and maybe I'll let you live."

Jonathan laughed. He laughed so loud my vision turned red, and all I wanted to do at that moment was drive a knife through his jugular and watch him choke on his blood as he begged for his life.

"Such hefty accusations, Mathew," he said, smirking. "Such hefty accusations."

Ms. Hannah chimed in, "What proof do you have?"

"Excuse us," I said, standing and anchoring Octavia's arm through mine.

"Mathew, I'm talking to—"

"Hannah," my uncle interrupted, raising a hand, "let him be. I can't wait to see what he has in store."

I smirked. The biggest mistake my uncle made was letting me leave this place alive. Now I knew how badly he was willing to protect his association. It was time to show him how far I was willing to go to ruin him.

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Chapter 30

OCTAVIA

Mathew isn't who you think he is. Meet me at this location if you wish to know who you're working with.

I held on tight to the paper Ms. Hannah had given me earlier during the ball. Shafts of moonlight sneaked past my bedroom window, hitting me on my bed and forming a silver halo. I knew who Arthur was. What did she mean I didn't know who he was? He was caring, protective and everything I could never have imagined. Still, the reporter in me wanted to hear her side of the story.

This was risky, though. What if it was a ploy to kill me? A part of my brain still itched to know what she had to say. To protect myself, I would ask Harry for his drone thingy to watch over me while I'm still with her. I once escaped bandits who were after my life. What was the worst that Ms. Hannah could do? Slap me.

The door of my room creaked open, and I hid the paper under my bed. A tender shudder ravaged my skin. Arthur was leaning against the door frame. His silhouette emanated power and dominance, and I gulped, grabbing my bed sheets.

"You looked so hot defending me today."

I tucked my lower lip inside my mouth, wetting it. "Your uncle is a massive asshole."

"He is." Arthur stalked forward, his shoulders sweeping the air with grace. "But he won't stop me from fulfilling my promise to you tonight."

My throat dried up. "What?"

"Your dress. I'm going to rip it off while I fuck you into oblivion."

I pouted. "But I love this dress.

"I would buy a million pairs of this dress if it means I could rip it off you whenever I wish."

"In that case," I got off the bed and strutted to him. His breathing caught as I ran my fingers over his chest, feeling the heat emanate from him, "I know you're angry from tonight. Why don't you take out that frustration on me?"

He held my chin and tilted it up, his hand clutching my waist. "Be careful what you wish for."

"I'm pissed off too, Arthur. I need that anger fucked out of me as well." I smiled and kissed his hand. "We'll both be doing each other a huge favour."

He spun me around, my hair swirling in the air. I wasn't ready, but his kisses rained down on my neck like a hailstorm, my spine sizzling with hot desire. I closed in on him, his hardness, spreading my ass cheeks apart. His kisses travelled from my neck down to my back and slid up to my underarm as he licked, my nipples beading and poking through my dress. He tore the gown and I gasped, the fuzzy texture of his wooly trousers licking my bare ass.

"Fuck, you're not wearing anything underneath," he muttered.

Spank after spank visited me as he bent me over, his painful visitations curling lust into my stomach. The slickness of my slit dripped down my groin, and I locked my legs together, trying to hold back the punishment my mind and body were experiencing.

"Do you still have your pills?" he asked, slapping his dick over my clenched ass.

I nodded, and he pounded into my pussy, my legs widening at his sweeping stroke. My knees trembled as I struggled to hold onto something for balance. The lamp on the bedside table was a good idea, but once I stretched towards it, he slammed harder. My hair covered my face, and my head landed on the table. The lamp screamed next to me as it scraped along the wooden surface with each powerful thrust.

Power after power fueled his movements, the rhythmic slapping of our skins shooting exploding bursts of euphoria through me. I wrapped my hands around the bedside table, the lamp falling and crashing to the floor in shards.

"Fuck, the lamp."

"I don't care." Arthur groaned, locking one of my arms above my back. "You get what you asked for."

Flashes of white occupied my vision as he slapped both my ass cheeks, my flesh burning with pain and pleasure. I reeled back, pressing back into him and soon realised what a bad idea that was. He lifted his strokes, slamming into my g-spot, my body wanting to suck in his entirety and leave him lodged in my pussy forever. He stretched me out, reaching parts of my body I didn't know existed while tormenting me with continuous slaps, which I relished.

I moaned as he grabbed a fistful of my hair, turning me towards the standing mirror in my room. My mascara streamed down my cheeks, and saliva dripped from my stuck-out tongue. Arthur bit on his lower lips as he watched my ass in the most forbidden gaze I had ever seen.

"Look at you," *spank,* "taking me all in like a good girl," *spank,* "your mouth drooling with so much saliva enough to flood an entire nation."

"I love the way your naughty words taint your posh accent."

He smiled at me through the mirror and dragged down my dress, leaving my breasts to dangle in front of me. A jolt of electricity channelled through my spine as he wrapped his hand around my neck, pulling me and arching my back further. He leaned down to kiss me, and I spat on him. His following action shocked me. He spat back, slapping my face as I watched him upside down.

"Such a good girl," he said, spitting on me and slapping my face again. "Let my spit drip all over your pretty face."

His warm saliva ran down my face, and my tongue darted out, consuming it. He groaned at my act and pounced fiercely, my ass rolling on his hips. Then disaster came. My bladder was full, and I needed to take a hot piss.

"Fuck, I have to pee."

He groped my ass cheeks, spreading them wide. "You asked for hard and rough. I don't give a damn if you have to pee. I'll keep fucking you while you let it out."

"Shit."

It was burning down there, and I had no choice but to let it out. In the mirror, I watched the searing hot golden liquid pour between my legs, a smirk of satisfaction on his face as he continued fucking me like a maniac. The mixture of all my juices and his rock-hard dick was a wanton's paradise. He pounded me to

the floor, my face lying next to my urine, the ammonia smell drifting into my nostrils and fueling my lust even further.

"Oh darling, you made such a mess," he muttered, slamming harder and harder. "I can still feel it, your burning hot piss wrapping itself around my straining cock."

I cried out, throwing my ass back for him. He picked up his pace, unleashing the beast, and my hand tried to hold myself up, but the piss made me slip, my face slamming to the floor. He rested his foot on my head and pounded harder and harder till I couldn't take it anymore, exploding on him and lying still till he finished inside of me, his warm goodness flowing out of my cunt.

As usual, he lifted me and took me to my bathtub, turning on the water and lighting up candles while he sat next to me, cleaning me up.

"About your uncle, what do you plan to do next?" I asked, my eyes heavy.

He lathered soap over my body. "What I should have done years ago."

"And what is that?"

"A hostile takeover."

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Chapter 31

ARTHUR

"Ugh, I hate this," Jane said, frowning.

I adjusted her tie and padded the extra puff of her black suit jacket. If we were going to take over our father's company, we had to do it in style. Holding the file, I stepped out of the car and held the door open for her. She still struggled with the tie, and I smiled, laughing at her adorability.

"Try not to get killed," Harry said, raising a thumb.

I gave him a curt nod. "Keep an eye on Ms. Michealson."

"She's in safe hands."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I'm serious, Harry."

"Geez, I know."

He drifted off, and I looked at the towering skyscraper, a slice of sunlight hitting my vision. Years ago, when our parents were still alive, we would visit them here. Now they were gone; it was left in the hands of that monster. Well, it wouldn't be for long.

"Brings back memories, huh?" Jane asked.

"Indeed." I glanced at her. "Ready?"

She nodded. We entered the building. It was swarming with employees walking like robots, not an inch of life in them. My uncle must have brainwashed them with countless amounts of work. With the horrible working conditions he had given his construction workers for the commissioning of the tower, this didn't come as a surprise.

A dark receptionist with a shaved head was in a corner, standing behind a desk with blue neon lights underlining it. "Knight group" was engraved on its body, and I clenched my jaw, remembering the bastard who was running what was rightfully ours.

The receptionist smiled at us as we approached her, her hands locked together. "Welcome to Knight Group; how can I help you?"

"We're here for the stakeholders' meeting," I said, pinching my sister, who was scratching her suit as if it were an alien object.

What? She mouthed.

"What organization?" the receptionist asked.

I handed over my company card, and her eyes flew wide. Of course, she would be surprised. I practically owned Knight Group with all my shares. So, I would be considered a top priority.

"This way, please," the receptionist said, leading us through a corridor before we entered an elevator. When we reached our designated floor, we were led by the lady to the boardroom. The boardroom had glass walls, and I could spot Jonathan sitting at the head of the table with other board members.

The receptionist walked in, and we followed. Jonathan's eyes flew open, and he stood, his gaze burning like an inferno. Jane practically growled behind me. This was her first time seeing our uncle since she couldn't join Octavia and me yesterday.

"Jane," I said.

She hissed and whispered, "He's right here. I could just kill him."

"You will, in record time."

Jonathan spread his arms wide and asked, "Is this some joke? Dalia, why would you bring these two to the stakeholders' meeting? Black Knight isn't here yet, and they're top priority."

Dalia, the receptionist, said with a shaky voice, "Sir, they're Black Knight."

"What?"

I smirked. "Hello, Uncle." I pulled out a seat for Jane, and she sat. Turning to the board of stakeholders, I clasped my hands. "Now, can we get started?"

"Uncle?" Jonathan narrowed his eyes at me, his lips slightly parted. A spark of light flashed in his dark orbs, and I knew the realization of who I was had hit him. "*You*."

"As some of you may not know," I said, rounding the table and handing out files to each board member. It was further proof of who I was and my connection to the company, "I'm Arthur Knight, and this is my sister, Jane Knight. We own Black Knight. We're also the long lost children of Martha and Peter Knight."

Jonathan's face turned red, and he balled his fists. "Nonsense."

"Now, I've been a bit worried about the incompetence of our CEO here." I rested my hand on the table, leaning over, my eyes never leaving the bastard's face. "So I called this stakeholders meeting. Considering my company owns ninety percent of Knight Group's share, my vote would be considered the majority. After much consideration, I have decided to relieve Mr. Jonathan Knight here of his duties as CEO and expect his resignation letter to my new office first thing tomorrow morning. All in favour of this motion?"

Jane's hand shot in the air, a smirk on her face.

Jonathan Knight chuckled. "You must be foolish if you think the members of this board would—"

One hand went up.

Another joined.

Soon, everyone in the room had their hands in the air, even Dalia, who was in the corner raised, despite knowing her vote didn't exactly count. And now, for the final vote, I raised my hand with a victorious smile, and my uncle shook in his boots.

"You can't do this to me!" he yelled, smashing his chair on the table. "I built this company, brick by brick!"

"Correction, our father did," Jane said.

Jonathan was panting heavily and pacing to and fro at the end of the room. He raked his hand through his hair, his chest rising and falling. His face did various forms of twitches as he watched me, hate fueling his gaze.

"*You*."

"Treat your workers like shit, Jonathan, expect shit from them."

He stormed off, slapping one of the board members in the face before he left the room. Dalia rushed to the poor man, apologizing to him.

"Starting today, my sister and I are taking what is rightfully ours. You're looking at the new CEO of Knight Group; if you have any questions, leave them with Dalia here," I said, shifting my gaze to the lady. "Dalia, three days from now, I'll be interviewing for the job of a personal assistant. I hope you won't let me down."

She smiled, showing all her teeth. "I won't, sir, I promise you."

"Good." I anchored an arm, and Jane wrapped hers through it. "What do you think?"

We left the room, and she said, "I've never been prouder of us."

"I'm sure mother and father would be happy."

For celebration, Jane and I found a nearby cafe and sat down, having a nice cup of tea and enjoying the view of the London streets from the glass windows adorned with flowers wrapped around the window frame. Twenty minutes in, I received a call from Harry.

"Bro, code red."

"What the bloody hell do you mean ‘code red’?" I asked, standing.

"Octavia just killed Ms. Hannah."

Fuck.

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Chapter 32

OCTAVIA

My visit to Ms. Hannah was something I knew Arthur would disapprove of. This was why I had begged Harry to watch over me from a distance with his drone. It took a lot of convincing before he finally budged. Apparently, Arthur had asked him to keep an eye on me, so he was technically doing that, but with a drone.

The Uber driver had stopped in front of a duplex with two pillars holding a portico. The walls stretched almost to the end of the street. I didn't expect her to be this rich. Before I could hit the gate button, it creaked open, and a golf cart approached me. Ms. Hannah was behind the steering wheel, dressed in a white shirt and blue shorts. She looked like the typical Porsche mom.

"Ms. Michaelson, lovely seeing you," she said. "Get in."

I joined her, and she turned the cart, driving through an elaborately trimmed pathway with what looked like a golf court spreading in the distance. For a place this massive, I had expected it to be crawling with servants and maids. Yet, there was no one in sight. My heart slammed against my ribcage, the probability of being killed flooding my mind. What if she was sending me to my grave?

"I sent away all the workers so we could have some time to ourselves," Ms. Hannah said.

"You didn't have to."

"Oh, please. We need some girl bonding time."

"You're way older than me. The only thing we can bond over is your love for kittens and knitting."

"You've got quite the tongue." She nodded her head. She stopped the cart when we reached a courtyard with a fountain in the middle and sunflowers growing on neatly trimmed hedges surrounding it. In a corner, there was a table and chair with chocolate cake and two steaming cups. She exited the cart and dragged out a table for me. "I can see why Mathew likes you."

I sat down, my body on edge. The hairs on my arms stood as I imagined someone stabbing me from the back. It was possible. But my curiosity to know what this lady had to say got the best of me.

"Cake?" she asked, cutting the chocolate cake with a knife and handing a plate over to me.

I shook my head.

"How about you try some tea?"

"I'm not here to have a tea party with you. Get straight to the point."

Ms. Hannah took a bite from her chocolate cake and dabbed her mouth with a handkerchief. "Mathew, he's quite the man, isn't he?"

Silence.

"And you know, before you, there was me."

Silence.

"And now, he has left me for you. What makes you feel he won't do the same to you?"

"Is this why you brought me here?"

I couldn't believe that I had wasted my time coming here. I watched her. Her eyes were soulless, and sadness swam in them. This was a woman who was trying to cope with losing her lover. But Arthur never belonged to her, and he never would.

"Doesn't it trouble you at night, knowing that one day, it could all be over?"

I gulped. *This bitch*. She was rubbing my fear in my face. I had thought about this but decided to shove it aside. The idea of what would happen when this was all over had tormented me ever since the both of us began fucking like wild animals. I hated to admit it, but this old hag might have a point.

"It's not like there's anything special about you. I've looked into your records. Your poor parents died when you were eight, and you've been in foster homes for as long as you could breathe." Ms. Hannah smirked. "He'll toss you into the trash once he's done using you."

I disliked my parents being brought into a conversation that had nothing to do with them. What did she mean by '*your poor parents*?' I decided to bite back.

"Don't be bitter. Just because he doesn't want your fermented pussy doesn't mean you should feel insecure in yourself. Word of advice: you should stick with

men your age."

She bared her teeth in rage and grabbed the knife from the cake, charging at me. I ducked her blow, tackling her to the ground. We both rolled over each other, and I struggled to win the knife in her hand.

"You bitch!" I screamed.

Ms. Hannah spat on my face. I knew this was a tactic to throw me off my guard. Ready for her attack, I dodged her jab and slapped her face. Her hold on the knife loosened, and I grabbed it. Now, sitting over her, she had an evil smile.

"He would always be mine," she said. "You'll always be the silly little reporter he just happened to meet."

A red fog flooded my gaze, and the demon of death possessed me. Before I could bring back my sanity, I was driving the knife into her throat multiple times, blood sputtering over my face.

"He," *stab*, "is," *stab*, "Mine."

Crimson blood dripped from my face. Fuck, I had killed her. *Fuck, fuck fuck*. I stood, tossing the knife away. My hands spasmed, and I raked them through my hair. The air in my lungs was cut short. Blood pooled around Ms. Hannah's limp body and slowly streamed towards my white canvas, staining my sole red.

I sat on the chair and poured some tea, gulping it in one sip. My throat was parched, and I continued drinking, aiming to get rid of this feeling. What was I going to do?

I watched Ms. Hannah's limp body. She was gone, just like that. What was Arthur turning me into? I was willing to kill for him. Fuck, I was turning into a psycho. What would he think of me? I counted the minutes as they passed, and I just sat there, my ass numb, ridden with sweat, and shivering from head to toe.

"Octavia."

His voice.

I'm in trouble.

***

I turned to face him, my joints frozen, my heart rate picking up to an abnormal pace. Arthur was dressed in a menacing outfit that meant he meant business. He wore a long coat, a shirt, and gloves, all draped in midnight black.

His oceanic gaze honed in on me and swirled with an unknown emotion. Was he mad at me?

He glanced at the dead body and flexed his jaw muscles. His fist balled into a fist. Fuck, I messed up. Everything was going so well, and I just had to ruin it with my stupid obsession. Standing from the chair, I rubbed the dried blood on my short black skirt, trying to wipe away the stain. Maybe if I looked less bloody, he wouldn't look at me like I was the biggest mistake in the world.

"What happened?" he asked, stalking towards me with a menacing gait.

I stepped back, almost stumbling over the chair. "Arthur, I'm sorry. I swear I didn't mean to kill her. It's just that she attacked me first and then said something about you not belonging to me, and I lost it."

We were an inch apart, the electricity between us crackling. The air was suffocating, and I gulped, waiting for some sort of punishment. He roughly grabbed my wrists, my hands shaking.

"You're all bloody." He sucked my blood-coated fingers. "Let me clean all that filth off you." His tongue wrapped around my nails, and I sucked in a sharp breath, my chest aching so fucking hard. "If there's any blood that gets to stain you, it should be mine because you belong to me, and my blood belongs to you."

Lust brimmed in my stomach, washing away the fear that once overcame me. He sucked harder, maintaining eye contact with me. I couldn't hold it any longer, letting out the moan that was lodged in my throat. He grabbed my hair and leaned in, kissing me, the taste of iron slapping my taste buds.

"How does your darkness taste?" he asked, his voice as hard as nails.

"Good."

He slammed his lips against mine again, imprinting himself in my mind. "Do you truly doubt yourself? You compare yourself to that old hag. How dare you?"

"I'm sorry."

He wrapped his hand around my throat. "Do you truly seek my forgiveness?"

I nodded.

He pointed next to the bleeding body. "Kneel."

His voice was rough and laced with danger. I didn't want to find out what he would do if I didn't listen to him. With shaky legs, I moved to the body and

knelt, my lungs tightening so hard they burned. Arthur's presence came behind me, and his breath fanned over my neck, leaving gooseflesh on my skin.

"Now, I'm going to fuck you over this dead body, and you're going to be a good girl and cum all over her."

He slapped my ass and raised my skirt. The smell of iron drifted into my nostrils, bringing tears to my eyes. I was about to be fucked over a corpse I had killed with my bare hands. I shouldn't be excited about the thought of it. But my pussy was a wet mess thinking about it.

Arthur groaned, hitting his entirety inside me. I closed my legs together, tightening up and making him moan. He thrust his gloved hand into my mouth and slammed into me like I was a hole that deserved to be filled over and over again. The blood streamed to us, and he stroked faster, forcing my hand to splat against the sticky liquid.

"Do you still doubt yourself? I'm fucking every inch of you over her bleeding corpse. Even in her death, I want her to know who I belong to."

"She looks like a dead bitch." I spat on Ms. Hannah's face.

"A dead bitch who's watching you get railed like a psychotic slut."

I whined and dropped lower, arching my ass in the air. The blood stuck to my face, and some slipped into my mouth as I stuck out my tongue, relishing the continuous ruination of my sanity.

"You always thought you were a good girl, didn't you?" Arthur asked, letting out a rough moan. "God, I love the psycho in you."

I spread my legs wider, stretching like a cat, my hands on Ms. Hannah's bleeding throat. The blood flow had reduced, but occasional bursts of scarlet would spill over my wrists. I was wrong when I said I didn't mean to do it. She crossed the line when she came after my man.

"Fuck me harder, let her know how good you do it, Arthur."

Arthur panted. "You'll be the death of me."

Blood was all over my clothes, but I didn't care because he didn't mind it. He didn't care if I killed someone. He didn't care if I was a nobody. He was willing to accept me for who I was. He noticed me, and that was enough. His hands rested on the small of my back, and he blanked my mind out with his dangerous

hip movements, lust after lust added to my craving pit of desire till I reached closer to oblivion.

He lifted me, his knees still on the floor as he glided my pussy over his dick, my toes curling in the air. I was close. Each stroke brought me nearer to the end of my normal life. Once I had finished on this corpse, there would be no going back to the Octavia I knew. I would forever have this blood on my hands, knowing very well that Ms. Hannah deserved it.

My eyes could only see white clouds, and soon, I was floating in paradise, spilling my satisfaction all over her corpse. Arthur groaned, releasing in me. He brought me closer to her, letting his cum mix with my juices as we let our essence pour onto her stupid face.

"Does this make you feel more secure? Do you believe me now?" he asked.

I nodded, kissing him.

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Chapter 33

ARTHUR

Sum her up in one word.

I couldn't.

She was air.

She was the sun.

She was the moon.

She was the stars.

She was mine.

I watched Octavia as she hung up the photos of our spa escapades on her wall, a bright smile on her face. She was enjoying every moment of this. The sun cascaded down her brown hair and lit up her dark eyes. Her skimpy skirt flowed as she stretched her legs to hang more photos over her bed.

Fear sneaked its way into my heart. We were nearing the end of the mission. I didn't want to know what would happen at the end of it. If she left, it would be understandable since this was a business agreement in the first place. I didn't believe it would turn into this paradise I had dreamed of for years.

The responsibility of always protecting people had always been on my shoulders. She was the first ever to take that burden, even if she got hurt in the process. She protected me, took a punch in the face for me, and made me know that I didn't need to do it all alone. In reality, I knew she wasn't at an advantage physically. But she made the effort, and that was all that mattered. And more importantly, she was smart enough to deduct a gig I had going on. No woman had ever rivaled a man as intelligent as I was.

These were just logical reasons to make me utterly obsessed with her.

But I knew this wasn't an obsession. This was love. True, pure love that the devil couldn't even taint. Paradise was at my fingertips, and I was scared I would lose it once the mission was over.

She glanced over her shoulder, her lips stretching with a smile. "What?"

"Nothing," I said, pointing at the wall with the pictures. "I look quite marvelous in those pictures."

"I took them."

"I am the creative property."

She rolled her eyes. "Ugh, you're such a cock."

I was about to make a filthy joke about her sucking mine before the door creaked open, and Harry walked in. He looked at the walls and clutched his hands to his waist. My face was red with embarrassment. There were some nude photos there.

"Man, I didn't know you were *hung* like that," Harry said.

"Harry, I'm seconds away from tossing you out the window."

"My bad," he hung up his hands and snapped his fingers. "You really have to see this. It's about your uncle."

I inhaled deeply. After returning yesterday with Jane, I detailed to Octavia everything that happened, and surprisingly, she was more than okay with my sister driving a knife through my uncle's neck once we were done. It shouldn't come as a surprise to me anymore, considering she had no problem with stabbing Ms. Hannah. *Poor woman.* She was bound to die soon. My bet was on my sister, but Octavia proved me wrong.

We both followed Harry to the living room where Jane sat, already dressed in an all-black SAS gear with a well-polished AK-47 in her hands. Her blue eyes were cold, and she stared off into the hologram in the middle of the room. Camera visuals were shown in the air, and I spotted Jonathan getting into a helicopter.

"I've been watching him," Harry said, swiping the Hologram and zooming in. "He's leaving the country."

Octavia moved close. "How do you know?"

"Well, he packed his luggage into a truck, and four vehicles with fully armed SAS guards are trailing behind it. They're headed to the airport. I've got Arthur's drones watching them."

"We can't let him get away," Jane said, tucking a gun into the holster at her thighs. Her gaze darkened. "Arthur, you promised I'd get to kill him."

"I did."

"So what do you say?"

I clenched my jaw, glancing at Octavia and throwing my gaze back to the hologram. Any moment wasted would mean that we wouldn't be able to catch up. Octavia, however, was the one problem here. This wasn't going to be like our usual missions. It was high-staked, and I couldn't afford for her to get hurt.

My chest tightened. There it was, that stupid feeling that had always kept me from getting too close to anyone. I thought I had let go of that fear. But it had returned a thousand folds to hunt me. I couldn't let her get hurt, not now that things were beginning to go well.

Clearly, she could handle her fellow ladies when the time came, as evidenced by yesterday. But this was different. She hadn't spent much time in this game. I was the one who buried Ms. Hannah in her compound. I also ensured I removed any security footage that might have indicated our arrival. Without me, Octavia wouldn't have been able to get herself out of that shitty situation. So, my notion is ideal. She wouldn't be safe.

"Pass me a gun," I said. "Time to end this."

I caught a rifle my sister tossed to me and left the room. Minutes later, I returned dressed in an all-black police SAS gear, similar to Jane's, a helmet on my head. Everyone was all geared up except Octavia, who walked up to me.

"What's my role in all of this?"

"You'll be a good girl," I said as I locked her with cuffs to a door knocker. She yelped, "and stay out of this. This is for your safety."

"Arthur, you had better not," she warned, struggling to escape the cuffs, but all it did was make the door cry. "This is my fight as much as it is yours."

"I'm sorry, Love. It's for your safety. I'll end the Association for you, just like I promised."

"Arthur, you gave me the gun." Her voice came out softer.

The gun. I was quick to decipher what she meant. It was the night we fucked on the rooftop with a gun. I had promised that I was fine with her protecting herself. This time, things were different. We were up against SAS, one of Britain's most elite forces. Taking them down would be a problem.

I didn't turn my back as I walked out of the apartment, her screams following me and stabbing me in the back. One word she screamed seared into my

conscience. *Traitor.* I was one. I made a promise and didn't hold up to it. It didn't matter if it was a non-verbal one. But if breaking a promise meant saving her life, I wouldn't mind doing it.

We exited through the fire escape to avoid unnecessary attention. Landing at the alleyway, Jane tapped my shoulders and said, "You made the right choice."

My core rattled. *Let's hope I did.*

***

"You drive like my mother!" Harry screamed at a driver. "Fucking Brit!"

He drove the fat truck ATV through the busy London streets, nearly scratching the paintwork each time he swerved. Usually, I would ask him to be careful with how he steered since I had spent a couple of thousands on the armored vehicle. But now, I couldn't help but think if I should've let Octavia join in.

"This isn't exactly a fun vacation," Jane said. We both sat at the back of the ATV, our rifles ready to fire. "She's better off where she is."

"I didn't know you cared about her."

"She took a punch in the face for you and even killed that weird pervert. I've got to say, the girl is quite brave. I love that in women."

"I just can't help but think if it's a bad idea, leaving her alone back there."

Jane cleaned her optic with her gloved thumb. "She'll be fine. This will be over before you know it."

I squeezed harder on my rifle's grip.

It would help if you cleared your mind.

I couldn't go into a battleground thinking about Octavia. That would be the easiest way to die. I needed to overflow my thoughts with another person who would motivate me to complete this mission.

Your uncle.

My temple pulsed.

That's more like it.

"Target in sight," Harry said, tapping the dashboard screen. A convoy of Lenco Bearcats with SAS soldiers strapped to their sides guarded the luggage truck upfront. If we were to attack, word would get out to Jonathan.

"The plan is simple," I said, adding mags to my magazine holder. "We terminate the soldiers, and Harry will drive the truck once we've dealt with the truck driver. Jonathan will hear about the attack but won't know it was us since Jane and I will be wearing our helmets. We will tell him we were attacked but were the only survivors."

"Let's not forget Jonathan has fucking SAS soldiers in the helicopter. You'll have to deal with those when we get on the plane," Harry reminded. He typed into the dashboard. My drones hovered the Bearcats. They were a few meters in the air, clear from hearing distance. The soldiers couldn't spot them because of that. "Drones in the air, ready for frag deployment. Frag and flash out in three, two, one."

The drones released the frag grenades and the flashbangs. Chaos ensued. Flashes of light and ear-ringing explosions created a cacophony, disrupting the soldiers as some were blasted away from their vehicles.

Jane and I barged out our ATV, using the armored surface as a shield. She took one side of the road, and I took the other. The stunned soldiers tried to get up, groaning and falling back to the ground. I fired at the back of their heads, terminating them. The soldiers inside the Bearcats charged out but were greeted by the bullets of my sister's rifle.

"I'm out of ammo," she said.

I tossed her a few mags and moved down the convoy. It was stopped due to the drone attack, and Jane had already cleared two Bearcats, leaving us with two. The occupants weren't ready to give up and fired at us like wild animals, their bullets scraping the body of the cleared Bearcats as we took cover behind one of them.

"Fuck, Arthur," Jane smiled, laughing manically. "I'm loving this!"

I rolled my eyes, attaching a new mag. "Seriously? I know you enjoy getting shot at, but we may as well die here if we aren't careful."

"We won't die. This is just training."

"Indeed, training to hell."

My drones hovered past us, the whirring of their blades making a slicing sound in the air. Another boom resonated through the ground, and I gave Jane a nod, signaling for us to charge again. I rose, the first soldier in my view still

stunned by the grenade from the drones. I shot at his forehead, my bullet piercing through his frontal lobe. The blood dripped down his face, and he fell limp to the ground.

From the corner of my eye, I spotted the machine gun wielder pan in my direction. I dove into a Bearcat, the storm of bullets crashing on the ground, eliciting sparks from the asphalt. The bullet casings fell to the tarred road, some rolling towards me. When the time for the soldier's reload came, I aimed at his head, blasting his skull off.

In minutes, we had cleared the remaining Bearcat, and the truck driver was on the floor begging for his life. Jane blasted his brain off with her pistol, and Harry had to change into one of the SAS soldiers' clothes before we headed to the airport. He drove the truck while I drove a Bearcat with Jane in the passenger seat. We arrived at the private plane terminal, and Jonathan quickly met us, his eyes red with stress.

"What the bloody hell happened out there?" he asked. One bullet to his head, and he could be gone. But I made a promise to my sister. Besides, I needed to find out what he was up to. If he was planning to flee, he must've had access to something I wasn't aware of.

"We faced a few difficulties on the way, but we handled it," I said.

He raked his hair. "Fuck, could you get a look at who it was?"

"Unfortunately, no, Sir. They fled before we got the chance to ID them.

"Alright, alright, let's get moving."

We reached the private plane. It was a sleek black beauty, and the engines were already running. *'KNIGHT GROUP'* was calligraphed on the bodywork of the jet. This bloody bastard was using my company plane even after being fired. I wouldn't let him get to my head. The plan was moving smoothly. Once we were in, there would be no stopping us. Harry would take care of the pilot when the need came, and Jane and I would handle the remaining SAS soldiers on the flight.

We entered the plane. As expected, two SAS soldiers were at the wood-paneled galley waiting, but another man was sitting on a beige sofa in the cabin, drinking champagne. He was dressed in a red shirt and black trousers, his head devoid of hair.

Jane leaned in and whispered, "Any idea who he is?"

I shook my head and gave Harry a curt nod. He departed and went over to the cockpit door and stood next to it.

"Mr. Pierce, I'm so sorry for the delay," Jonathan said, sitting beside Pierce.

Pierce waved him off and settled a laptop on his lap, plugging in a USB drive. "Oh, please. Once I'm done downloading all these accounts into this drive, you'll have access to the recently washed money from the government officials."

"Oh, marvelous," Jonathan clapped, a toothy grin on his face, "absolutely marvelous. You're a genius, Pierce."

A familiar scent hit my nostrils as a hostess passed me, a tray of champagne in her hands. The plane was in the air now, and I knew sooner or later, I would have to strike. The hostess bent down to serve the drink to Jonathan, and when she stood to face me, my eyes widened. Under those layers of heavy, unusual makeup—especially that ridiculous amount of blush on her cheeks and the horrible contour—I would still know those dark eyes.

Octavia?

How did she get here?

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Chapter 34

OCTAVIA

"Fuck!"

The fucking cuffs were hooked neatly to the door knocker. No matter how many times I pulled it, it was useless. The only thing I managed to do was burn my wrist with excessive friction. I slid to the floor, my head boiling with rage. Part of me hated Arthur, while another part could understand his reasoning. I wouldn't sit here and pretend I didn't know he was trying to protect me.

However, some nights ago, he let me hold a gun to his face. It was a sign that he trusted me with danger. Now, it was time for him to let me prove it once again, and he decided to bail on me. This fight was mine as much as it was his.

I glanced at the living room. There was nothing that could help me get out of these cuffs. A sound popped incessantly, and I searched for the noise source. The sound came once again. A phone was sitting on one of the sofas next to me. It had a picture of Harry in a club, and I assumed it would belong to him. An idea hit me.

My wrists ached as I stretched to the phone. After a minute of intensive groaning and pain, I grabbed it. It was locked. *Shit.* Holding the power button and the volume button, I reset the phone. Inputting my Google details, I was able to access the browser and search for several pizza places. I found the nearest Domino's and dialed their number, and the pizza man picked up.

"What would you like, Miss?"

"Anything. If you can reach my place in ten minutes, I'll tip you one hundred pounds."

I told the man my location, and in five minutes, there was a knock at the door. My eyes widened. That was fast. I asked the delivery person to come in, and when he did, his eyes threatened to pop out of his sockets once he saw me cuffed to the door.

"Who did this to you?" he asked, his brown hands trembling.

I pointed at the wooden island in the open-plan kitchen. "There's a knife there; please get it."

"Okay, okay." He settled the pizza on the island and joined me, handing over the knife.

I extended the cuffs, straightening them. Rubbing the knife on the chain, I landed a blow. It didn't shatter. I landed another blow. It didn't even move an inch.

"Can I?" Pizza man asked, opening a hand.

I nodded, giving him the knife. He took it, raising it, his eyes flashing with determination. With a single blow, he shattered the cuffs. I ordered him to get me some butter from the fridge, and we loaded the cuff with lots of it. With enough butter as lube, I was able to slip my hand away from bondage.

Time for payment arrived, and I rushed off to Arthur's office, dragging out all his drawers. It didn't take long to find his wallet. I took all the money I found in it and handed it to the pizza man, who was so happy he smiled till he left the apartment. He deserved it. Now, I only needed to head to the nearest airport. It was a gamble because if I landed in the wrong one, all this effort would be in vain.

I would stop Jonathan Knight, even if it were the last thing I would do on earth. My parents' death was unfortunate, and I was going to ensure people like him wouldn't ruin the lives of other kids or kids to come.

***

The airport was swarming with people all rolling their luggage, a look of urgency all over their faces. A ring reverberated through the place, and an announcer's voice came, informing the airport of the next flight. Signs showing directions to different areas hung from the ceiling, and I searched for the private jet terminal.

I followed different routes and always ended up at the entrance. Sweat patched my back, and I was beginning to think this wouldn't work. Taking a deep breath, I approached a couple sitting on a bench. I frowned at myself for interrupting them, but I urgently needed to find my way. I was running out of time.

"Excuse me," I said.

The man held tightly to his girlfriend and raised a brow. "Yes?*

"I'm looking for the private jet terminal."

He pointed me in the right direction, and I was off, my heels on the back of my head. The difference between the private jet terminal and the regular terminal was wild. From the entrance, you could spot the delicacies being served, and stewards and stewardess attended to the occupants. A man wearing a security vest stood at the entrance. I sat on a bench, wondering how to navigate the tight security.

In one minute, I noticed his pattern. He would stroll from one end to the other and have his eyes glued to his phone, watching some videos on the internet. I waited for the time he was away from the door and sneaked in.

A blast of cold air hit my nostrils. The A.C. was blasting at full force. Inside the private jet terminal, the atmosphere was serene and luxurious. Soft ambient lighting bathed the spacious lounge area, where plush leather seats beckoned weary travelers to relax and unwind. The walls were adorned with elegant artwork, and polished marble accents added a touch of luxury to the surroundings. A sleek, modern bar offered an array of top-shelf liquors and cocktails, while a gourmet catering station boasted an impressive spread of delicacies, from fresh seafood to decadent desserts.

As I took in the lavish surroundings, I saw a blonde flight attendant sitting by a bar with luggage next to her. There were no other flight attendants around, and my bet was that she was Jonathan's attendant for his flight.

Approaching her, I cleared my throat to catch her attention. "Excuse me," I began tentatively.

The flight attendant turned towards me, her expression friendly yet professional. "Yes, how can I assist you?" she inquired, calm and reassuring.

"I'm supposed to be the flight attendant for Jonathan Knight. Do you happen to know where he is?"

The attendant raised her brow. "Jonathan Knight?"

"Yes."

"Well, there must be some mix-up. I'm meant to be his attendant. Mr. Knight contacted me directly."

Gotcha. I smiled internally. I wouldn't raise suspicion since only the flight attendant and Jonathan's escort would probably know he was about to leave. So, if I mentioned knowing about it and claimed to be the rightful flight attendant, it would seem plausible.

"You're not even dressed in your uniform," she said, gesturing at me.

Shit, I didn't think of that. I had to come up with a plan to make her let down her guard. It had to be something believable and smooth. I made a mental note not to stammer while I fibbed.

"My luggage got taken by the taxi who dropped me off."

Her eyes softened. "My goodness."

"Yes." I nodded. "Mr. Jonathan asked me to replace you."

"I should call—"

"No, there's no need for that," I interrupted. "His helicopter should be landing anytime soon."

"But I still need to do a background check."

"Do you *really* want to get on Mr. Knight's bad side?"

The flight attendant froze. Then she shook her head and said, "Of course not."

"Great. If you don't mind, I would need a pair of your uniform and some makeup that would make me like a typical teenage girl from Essex. You know, the typical British girl makeup stuff that was trending on TikTok recently."

"Sure, I could do that."

Jonathan knew what I looked like. I needed something that would change my appearance. The horrible British girl makeup look would be enough to make me look like a ghost of my former self. The extensive foundation, orange fake tan, and horrible contour with crazy lash extensions should do the trick.

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Chapter 35

ARTHUR

Octavia left for the hostess waiting room, and I bided my time, waiting a few minutes before I went after her. She was standing next to a toilet, and I dragged her in and clutched a hand over her mouth before she could yell.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Her eyes widened. "Arthur?"

"Yes, it's me. And by the way, your makeup looks horrible."

"I know; I was trying to look unrecognizable."

I clenched my jaw. What was wrong with her? I locked her up to keep her out of danger, and she foolishly wandered into the lion's den. If we weren't careful, she would ruin the mission. Wait, how did she leave the apartment?

I asked her, and she told me.

"What? And she fell for it?"

She nodded. "Apparently, you're rubbing off on me."

"Don't blame me for your escapades. The air hostess was just gullible."

"I'm still mad at you," she said. "You locked me up."

"For your safety."

"No," she pointed at me, "you don't get to say I have no role in this mission. I brought it to you, remember? There's no way I was going to sit back and do nothing."

I balled my fist, watching her. We were close, the heat from our bodies wrapping around us. If I didn't have an important mission to attend to, I would have claimed her lips here and now. Electricity shot to my lower end, and blood rushed to it. Fuck, I needed to concentrate. But despite Octavia's silly makeup, the idea of fucking her in a toilet while the enemies were just inches away was tempting. I would have to call myself to order.

"Fine," I said, grabbing her chin with my gloved hand. "But you had better behave. We both know this mission is important."

She frowned. "I know." Standing at the door, she glanced down at my pants, smirking. "But you'd better find a way to bring him down before you get out there."

I blushed. *Fucking vixen.*

I flooded my thoughts with images of disgusting maggots and recited a few religious passages from the Bible. That seemed to do the trick. I went back to the passenger cabin. Pierce was handing over the flash drive to Jonathan, who had a broad smile so similar to the Cheshire cat.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Pierce," Jonathan said, pouring himself more champagne. "Let's celebrate."

With a subtle nod at Harry, he moved into the cockpit. Jane read my movements, and we both marched to the SAS soldiers at the galley. They extended their hands, one saying, "Hey, you're not meant to—"

I silenced him with a punch. A brawl began. He speared his shoulder into my ribs, slamming me to the floor. Pierce screamed like a little bitch, dropping his champagne glass, and it broke into shards. The guard strangled me, and I grabbed a glass shard, stabbing it into his neck. His blood splattered all over my hands. I hissed, tossing him away from my body.

Jane delivered several punches to the face of her victim until he was as good as dead. Knowing her, she wouldn't stop there. She pulled out her pistol and rammed a bullet through the man's head.

Pierce's face turned white with fear. "P-please don't shoot—"

Tendrils of steam left the barrel of Jane's gun. Pierce's body fell limp to the sofa, blood streaming out of his mouth. Jonathan was at the corner of the cabin, holding tightly to his USB. His eyes glanced between his soldiers and Peirce.

"What the fuck? Who are you two?"

We took off our helmets and dragged down our masks.

"Hello, Uncle," Jane said, smiling. "I've been waiting for this moment my whole life."

"Kids, let's not get—"

Jane dragged him to the center of the cabin, her gun to his head. "Kneel."

"Jane dear, you shouldn't—"

She hit the back of his knees, forcing him to the ground. Silly Octavia was quick to grab the USB. She didn't want to take any chances. I wanted to let out a laugh but held myself.

"Take off your shirt," Jane ordered.

"Please, please, listen. I can offer you—"

She placed her pistol on his forehead. "Take off your shirt, Jonathan. I won't say it twice."

He unbuttoned his shirt, his hands a trembling mess. Tears rolled down his eyes, and goo dripped from his nose. I had thought, with how he was acting all tough, he wouldn't be quick to shed a tear. Never had I been glad to be wrong. Jonathan Knight was a bastard who got lucky, and as promised, I would let Jane teach him a lesson.

His hairy chest rose and fell as he dropped his shirt next to him. Jane took off his belt. She whipped his back, the belt snapping in the air. He cried, falling to the ground, his legs vibrating.

"That's for me."

Whip!

"That's for Arthur."

Whip!

"That's for making my brother cry."

Whip!

Whip!

"That's for making me watch him cry as you tore his skin with your belt."

She landed endless blows on Jonathan's back, tears falling down her cheeks. My heart clenched. I didn't know she held so much guilt about the days I would take the belt for her. Octavia snatched her hand before she could land another blow, and she collapsed on her shoulders, sobbing. Jonathan was probably numb; he could barely move a muscle anymore. Spit drooled out of his mouth as he jerked occasionally on the floor. He was having a seizure.

"Say hello to the devil for me," I pulled the trigger, his head blowing up, and his brain matter splattering over the floor.

I sighed, putting my gun back in my holster. A sense of calm overcame me, the world slowing for a second. It was all over. We had gotten the USB. With its contents, Octavia could surely expose whoever she wanted.

There was a thumping sound echoing from the speakers of the plane. The sound of groans and the tussling of shirts rang through the room. *Crap.* Harry must have been struggling with the pilot. I rushed towards the cockpit, but the plane tilted to a side, tossing me back. Clouds of smoke shielded the window. Flames were burning the propellers. We were fucked. The windows shattered, and the tightly sealed door compressed. In seconds, it detached from the aircraft. My uncle and Pierce were sucked out of the plane, their bodies plummeting to the river below.

Octavia's scream tore through the air as she moved towards the vacuum. I launched my body, grabbing onto her tightly. Her eyes were wide with terror, and her entire body was out of the plane. I held on tightly to a broken window for support, the shards piercing into my skin. Blood pooled around my palm, but I wasn't ever going to let go.

"Arthur!" Jane screamed. "Arthur!"

"We have a bit of a problem," Harry said over the intercom. *Really? A bit of a problem?!* "I'm going to land the plane safely in the River Roding; we're currently over Epping."

"Hold on tight," I told Octavia, my heart thumping hard.

No, not today. I wasn't going to lose anyone anymore. I had lost Matilda. If Octavia was gone too, I would never be the same. Life would be black and white; other colors wouldn't look pretty. Food would taste sour, and the air would be pungent. Death would call my name, and I would willingly answer.

"Arthur, the USB!" Octavia yelled, pointing at it. The USB drive was slipping closer to the door, about to fall out of the plane. "Arthur, let go of me and save it!"

Was she on opium? Firstly, she didn't know how to swim. If I let go of her, she would drown to her death. Secondly, did she genuinely believe I would let go of her for a silly USB file with money? At the start of this business arrangement, I wanted that money more than anything. But with time, I learned that some things were more important than money. Octavia was more important than all

the riches in the world. She was at the top of my pyramid, and nothing could ever compare to her.

"No, I'm not letting go."

"Arthur, Arthur, you need to let me go."

"No, no, Octavia, I simply cannot," I said, pain from the shattered windows so intense I could no longer feel anything.

"If you don't let go, the drive would be lost." Her eyes were wet with tears, fear swimming like sharks in her dark depths. "This is finally your chance to be the richest thief in the world. Why won't you let me go? This is what you wanted; you have the whole world in your grasp."

I tightened my grip on her hand. My palm was getting clammy with sweat, and she was slowly slipping away, about to hit her death.

"You're right. I do have the whole world in my grasp. *You're* my world, Octavia, and I never intend to let you go."

Her lips quivered, and the tears came rolling down her cheeks. "I'm sorry."

She let go of my hand. Her free fall was the scariest moment of my life. I watched the woman I loved descending to her death, and I did the only right thing I could think of. I went after her. My hands were stretched out, and I kept my arms, legs, and core straight. This added to my speed.

The water enveloped her. In seconds, the river wrapped around me as well. I swam closer to her sinking figure, her hands stretching to me as she struggled. The water must've been burning her lungs. I grabbed her wrist and pulled her closer to me. With no hesitation, I swam to the surface, not wanting her to endure any more torture from the river.

We both caught our breaths once we reached the surface. I swam to a grassy shore, settling her. She coughed up water, her hands on her chest. My heart clenched as I watched the excessive liquid expel from her. Why did she have to be so stupid? I pulled her in for a tight hug, watching Harry land the plane on the river. Water engulfed the lower part of the aircraft, and soon, my sister and Harry were swimming towards us. I let out a sigh of relief. Everyone was okay.

Octavia's body shivered, and I hugged harder, aiming to warm her with my body heat, even though I was wet myself.

"I thought I was going to die. Arthur, I thought I was going to die."

I buried my head in her shoulder, my hands holding the back of her head. "If you die, I shall have no reason to live. Please don't hurt me by saying such words. I'm here now; you're safe."

Harry and Jane Joined us, their bodies soaked with water.

"Bro, we've got to bounce," Harry said. "I just spotted the local police."

I lifted Octavia and placed her onto my back and looked over at my sister, who gave me the most heartwarming smile. I knew what it meant. She was glad this was all over, and I would keep my promise to her of never swindling again. But for now, we needed to get to safety.

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Chapter 36

OCTAVIA

I tapped my leg, holding tightly to my phone. He'd told me to meet him here. The cold air from the park wrapped around me, and I crossed my arms, the warmth from my coat bringing a feeling of calm to me. Children played Frisbee on the well-manicured grass, and some couples had a picnic on their splayed-out mats. The leaves of the trees lining the path I stood on rustled as gusts of breeze ran through them.

He would come.

I looked at the text message he sent me. This was the exact spot he told me. I had left London one month ago, and the only time I heard from him was the occasional text messages he would send. He had taken over his company successfully, but unfortunately, I was unable to expose the members of the association because I couldn't get my hands on the USB drive.

But I didn't mind. All I wanted was to see him again. At least he got to send out one million dollars to each of the little kids affected by his uncle's tyranny and put all of them in a boarding school he built.

My heart flipped once I spotted black oxfords appearing from a sharp bend in the path. He was dressed in a black overcoat, shirt, and trousers. His dark hair was shaved to a buzz cut, and he had fully grown his dark beard, which was usually at stubble-length. I smiled. I was digging this new look.

A bouquet of roses was in his hands, and when he reached me, he handed it over.

"Hello, Love," he said and leaned in to kiss me. I raised onto my toes, letting his touch consume me like it always did. It was soft and had a special place in my heart. "I brought these for you."

"Thank you." I took his gift and narrowed my eyes at his bandaged hand. "Your wound, it hasn't healed yet."

"It will," he said, leading me to a chair, and we both sat down. "Don't worry about me."

"You know, I thought you wouldn't come."

"Really?" He crossed a leg over the other. "You shouldn't ever doubt yourself when it comes to me."

I settled the flowers by my side. "Well, that's good to know."

"Oh, and I thought I should give this to you."

My eyes flashed wide. It was a drive. Don't tell me this was what I thought it was. It couldn't be possible. I saw the plane crash.

"Is this the—"

Arthur nodded. "Since I own Knight group, I still had some favors people owed my uncle. So, I pulled a few strings and retrieved the drive from the river. It's fixed now and has all the names of the officials. I've taken the money, though."

I smirked—typical Arthur.

"How much was it?"

He shrugged. "20 percent of America's annual GDP."

I looked at the drive. I now had a purpose. With this drive, I could bring about the end of those bastards. While doing it, I could even end up winning an award. A girl could dream big.

Despite this, one question loomed in my head. *What now?* Would he leave me and never come back to the U.S.? I fiddled with the lapels of my coat, and my gaze dropped to my feet. A soft wind licked my hair, and I tucked the strands behind my ear. I was scared to ask him.

"I know you're probably tired of hearing this, but," he sliced his cerulean gaze and honed in on me. I gulped, my throat parched, "thank you for everything."

"You don't have to thank me, Love. I am glad we met."

"No, no, really, you don't understand. I never had anyone to care for me unconditionally since my parents died. My relatives didn't want me, and my foster parents treated me like trash. I never had anyone notice me."

He inched closer and held my cheek, his touch like iron wrapped in velvet.

"You will never go unnoticed because I will notice you. In this movie called Life, I vow to be your observer." He kissed me and asked, "What do I taste like?"

"Forever," I replied.

"Then that is what I will be to you. I will be your forever."

I blushed. "Arthur."

He smiled and handed me a box of chocolates. We both shared from it, watching the kids play in the distance, laughing our hearts out when one toppled over the other. I watched my *forever* as he smiled as bright as our future together. He was mine today, tomorrow, and for eternity. Nothing was going to topple this feeling.

"Before I forget," he said, handing me a piece. "Jane said I should give this to you."

I grabbed it from him and hurriedly opened the piece of paper.

Hey,

I'm not good with letters, so I will go straight to the point. Thank you for changing my brother. You do not know how long I've been trying to get that crackhead to stop stealing.

I smiled.

And you, Octavia, managed to do it in just weeks. I have only one thing to ask of you: Treat him right, and maybe we might be friends.

P.S Harry says hi.

"What did she say?" Arthur asked.

I tucked the letter in my overcoat's pocket. "Just girly things."

"Hmm."

"I'm curious. If you were to write a book about these crazy few days we had together, what would the name be?"

He leaned back, staring into the bright blue sky. "Beautiful Swindlers."

Beautiful Swindlers? It wasn't a bad name for a book where I ended up with the man of my dreams.

I looked over to Arthur. "So what now?"

"I'm going to make you my wife."

Fuck.

I screamed internally.

THE END.

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